

Quiet Nights

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org/works/656991) at <http://archiveofourown.org/works/656991>.

Rating:	Explicit
Archive Warning:	No Archive Warnings Apply
Category:	Multi
Fandom:	The Avengers (2012) , Iron Man (Movies) , The Avengers - Ambiguous Fandom , Thor (Movies)
Relationship:	Loki/Tony Stark , Clint Barton/Natasha Romanov , Pepper Potts/Tony Stark , Jane Foster/Thor
Character:	Loki (Marvel) , Tony Stark , Natasha Romanov , Clint Barton , Thor (Marvel) , Nick Fury , Steve Rogers , Bruce Banner , Pepper Potts , James "Rhodey" Rhodes
Additional Tags:	Dreams , Emotional Manipulation , Emotional Baggage , Hurt/Comfort , Loki being Loki , Established Relationship , Character Study , Fluff and Angst , Fluff , Smut , Explicit Sexual Content , Swearing , Banter , Friendship , Humor , Intoxication , Jealousy , mandatory team building activities , Frenemies , Sickfic , everyone's kind of a jerk , no seriously they are in this one
Stats:	Published: 2013-01-27 Completed: 2013-08-02 Chapters: 61/61 Words: 128747

Quiet Nights

by [babyblueglasses](#)

Summary

In anything but, Loki and Tony Stark find themselves pursued by dark and lonely hours in nights where sleep is no friend. Bored and restless, Loki decides to force his moving in to Avenger's Tower. In an effort to support Thor, the other residents agree to the move in, but what is the god of chaos's true intention?

A Voice That Can Recall

Chapter Notes

This fic is exclusive to ao3 and cannot be posted anywhere else. Please notify if distributed elsewhere.

The original prequel to this has been deleted, sorry. The intro may take a little catch up to grasp, but essentially Tony and Loki have a pre-established relationship of sorts when this starts. I don't have any intention of going back to edit this or redo the prequels (I'd rather spend my free time on new work), but I hope you'll enjoy it nonetheless.

"It was an accident," a young voice said.

"It was deliberate," an older woman replied, unyielding.

He felt his heart beating faster, anxiety plunging through him. "No, I assure you, by the nine it was not," he heard his voice say, older now.

"Do not speak of the nine realms in such a foul manner," the woman answered, her voice the same.

"Mother, I assure you, I meant no harm." He could hear himself, a note of pleading in his voice.

Her tired sigh took up a long space between his voice and her answer. "Loki, I grow tired of forgiving your transgressions when you make no effort to amend them."

"Please understand," he said, his arms moving out from his sides in a grand gesture, "fault can only be put to poor circumstance, it was no intention of mine."

"Loki, I love you, but you are a liar."

Everything went black and he found himself lying in bed.

He ran a hand down his arm, thinking of the dream. It occurred to him now, as it never had before, that he had always been wrapped in fine garments. Not that he wasn't since his exile, but there is cloth that only touches royalty.

Nothing like the old cotton that adorned him now. It would be shameful to appear before the court in it, the tattered "Black Sabbath" text missing in places where the ink had left it.

How would he have looked upon himself, if his former self could see the being he had become? He felt his stomach lurch. Well, if it was any consolation, he hated that person too.

Loki rolled over onto his stomach, his warm breath passing across the pillow. These dreams had become more and more frequent lately, like his past was trying to crawl its way up through his

chest and out his throat, into the waking world.

He wished to use the mortal man as a distraction from the dreams, but he seldom found Tony in the realm of dreams at all. It seemed that the mortal man wasn't sleeping much.

At first, with some glee, Loki enjoyed replaying their past encounter. Tony had avoided him for a while then, pouting. Sulking. Tony denied it, but they both knew. Still, Tony had relented and forgiven the god. That left Loki with little to go on as to what preoccupied the man now.

He closed his eyes, uncertain whether he should will sleep to come or take the hollow hours of waking that were to follow. Uncertain which he should be avoiding more, he lowered his eyelids. In the morning he found that sleep had chosen him instead, but his dreams had been empty. A relief.

Perhaps it was time to see what the mortal man was up to.

The One That Waits for Me

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The inventor looked up from his sofa, a pair of thinly framed wire glasses obscuring his eyes. Tony gazed at his black haired visitor over his blueprints mildly. When had the man of iron acquired glasses? Loki was so intent on the sudden change in Tony that he failed to notice that they were not alone.

"Hello Mr. Laufeyson," Pepper said with a rare and fearless air of authority. In the entirety of his life, Loki had seen such an expression only a handful of times. He found it off putting and baffling. Was she not afraid of him?

"Shall I leave you two alone?" She asked, watching Loki leisurely, all the while clearly directing the invitation at Tony.

"No," Tony said. "Whatever Loki has to say he can share now. I don't have time to spare today."

Loki wished immensely that he had not come.

Pepper sat back down on the couch beside Tony, still watching Loki like a cat with a fish in its mouth.

Loki's spine straightened. It occurred to him now that he had not bothered to change clothing since waking. There had been nothing grand about his entrance. He'd have to make up for it. "I had rather hoped to..." his voice trailed off, noticing the physics book he had given Tony on the table in front of Pepper. "Reacquire the book I left. Momentarily."

In one swift, graceful movement, Pepper picked up the book and walked calmly over to Loki. He looked down at the book in her outstretched hand. "Thank you," he heard her say. "It's been immensely beneficial to my business."

He responded slowly. Pepper was making him feel very small, and it was unnecessarily humbling and frustrating. Tony was watching them with close precision, and Loki could feel the wave of warning emanating from the man. If Loki laid one hand on Pepper, Tony would be gone. He knew that.

"My pleasure," he replied, forcing a toothy grin. "This is but a meager piece of a rather expansive library," he told her, suddenly overcome by the desire to impress.

Pepper nodded in reply, returning to the sofa beside Tony. Now two mortals were watching Loki in a way that made him very uneasy, and it was not something that Loki was accustomed to. "Perhaps sometime I can show the two of you Asgard," he said, "I think you will find that it greatly outshines your Midgardian world."

"Thank you Loki," Tony cut in dryly, "but we're perfectly content in our own realm."

"As you wish," Loki said, noticing something familiar in the way that Pepper's leg curled against Tony. One of the stolen memories resurfacing. "Well, I will be on my way then."

He did not stay to hear their reply.

Tony watched the god go, remorse tangling in his chest. He let it go. He'd have to talk to Loki later.

Without skipping a beat, Pepper's attention was back on the blueprints. The afternoon passed peacefully, the morning encounter going undiscussed.

Night came slowly. For a while Tony laid in bed, staring. In the dull light of his reactor, he could just barely make out the ceiling above him. He sighed. How would he find Loki when he arrived? Would he even be able to find Loki tonight? It was getting harder and harder to find Loki unless Loki wanted to be found. Tony sighed, a nervous knot twisting in his stomach. It had been strange to see Loki standing in his office this morning. The rising sun had pulled itself up over his sleep ridden features, winking down Loki's long black hair and skipping across the folds in the worn cotton t-shirt. With sleep still in his eyes, he had looked at Tony with undisguised curiosity. His new glasses, Tony realized. He smiled just a little then.

Truth be told, Tony felt a warmth in his chest when he saw the god. That didn't scare him. He wasn't ashamed to admit it. But things were not that simple.

Again, Tony sighed, shifting on the mattress. It made him uncomfortable to think of the coming encounter, but he knew it was necessary. So he would go. He would look for Loki until he found him, whether the trickster liked it or not.

Loki put off sleep for as long as he could. Not because he was afraid of what sleep would bring but because he had no idea where to go in his dreams. He was running out of places to go. So he turned over in his bed, dressed in grotesquely luxurious clothes stolen from his once Aesir home.

"Stay," Loki heard a familiar voice saying. He hadn't realized that he had drifted off to sleep. In a frost bitten field he stood, a gray morning sky overhead. Slowly he turned around, uncertain.

It was Tony.

"Don't you dare leave," Tony said, quickly crossing the space between them. He was terrified that Loki would vanish, leaving everything unsaid. "We are taking care of this right now."

"Of what," Loki said, eyes dark and defiant.

"You need to understand something," the man said, rubbing one arm with his other hand. He did not break eye contact, but settled for crossing his arms. "Pepper has always been there for me. Always," Tony said, his voice heavy with conviction. "When you tore apart New York City, when you killed people on my watch Loki, Pepper was there to pick up the pieces. What do you think happened after you deliberately tore apart our lives?"

Loki looked away, feigning boredom, feeling like his head was caving in on itself. "Are you saying you wish to end this?"

"No," Tony said patiently. "I'm saying that I want you to understand something."

Silence hung heavily in the air between them.

Tony did not elaborate. With chagrin Loki realized he would have to ask for clarification if he wished for an answer. "Which is?"

"Sit down," Tony said softly, gesturing towards the ground. Loki scoffed. "It's a dream, it'll only be cold if you want it to be," Tony chided him. Loki crossed his arms and drew his lips into a thin line. "Sit down jackass," Tony said, pulling at Loki's garment to bring him to the ground where Tony was already. Loki caught himself, trying to sit with as much regained grace as possible.

"You know what I've noticed about you," Tony began, Loki's mind screaming possibilities before

Tony could finish. "You claim to love chaos, but you desire order. You wanted to rule the human race. Leaving us to our own devices would be far greater chaos than your rule."

"Says who," Loki asked flatly.

"You," Tony said. "You look down on us as incapable of achieving greater. You thought you could fix us." Tony let it sink in for a moment. "Whether that was all smoke up the ass or a misguided ego, I don't give a shit. Anyway. The point is, there's chaos and order in you. There's both."

Loki inclined his head slightly, expression illegible. Tony took that as a good sign.

"So, then there's me. I like getting what I want. Thinking with my little brain. I'm not above having a good time at my own cost. Okay? I know I have self-destructive tendencies. Whatever. But I also have loyalty and I can get shit done, and I know a good thing when I see it. There's room for chaos and order in my heart, just like yours. Are you following me?"

"I suppose," Loki replied glibly.

Tony continued. "So just like I crave your chaos, I also want Pepper. You're both in this mechanic chest of mine." Tony felt Loki getting angry beside him, jealousy shooting through the being's veins. "Listen, it's not fucking fair for you to ask anything else of me Loki," Tony said, voice rising. "You come into my life, intent on killing me and my team, manipulate everyone around you, including me, and somehow, some fucking how, I still end up wanting you! Do you not see how that's fucked up? And through all of it, Pepper has been there for me. She has been there for me through every single one of my stupid fuck ups before and after you Loki. She's there for me unconditionally, Loki, and I can't say that of you." He paused, his voice still rising. "I don't even know where you are half the time. You get to call the shots. You're not there for me when I'm fucked up Loki, and I need someone too."

Loki stood up and Tony was right on his feet in the same instance. He grabbed Loki's shoulder, holding him there. "I am still here with you. I am still here, just like you want. I am here," he said, breathing heavily, in out in out, eyes locked on Loki.

His heart was racing, he thought it might rupture out through his ears. He stared at Tony. His not-chaos Tony.

"But don't fucking ask me to give up Pepper. She built me up again after you burned the Avengers to the ground, Loki."

"I wondered this morning why she wasn't intimidated by me," Loki said. "She does not see me as a threat," he said softly. He closed his eyes, unable to bear Tony's hard eyes any longer. He didn't know what to do. This was not something that he'd planned for. "Does she know about this?"

"Yes," Tony said. "How else could I explain everything that happened without telling her?"

"And everyone else?" He asked, but he really just meant Thor.

"No," Tony answered. "Pepper's good at PR, but she's not a miracle worker."

"And she's..."

"We talked about it," Tony said. "I told her to leave me. I told her that she deserves better. Far better. And that I couldn't break things off with you. This is not healthy relationship material. And that I'm fucking confused. And it was actually a damn long conversation that cost me more than 12 percent," he said with a tiny, private smile. "So we talked about it and set some guidelines and if

things don't work out, they don't work out. I don't fucking deserve it, but somehow Pepper's sticking by me."

Loki was aware only of his heart, beating erratically.

"You threw me through a window and I'm still standing here with you, Loki," Tony said. "You're not in a position to bargain with me," he forced out a breath, grasping for straws. Did the god understand how fucking hard all of this was for him? "You're getting far more than you deserve."

Loki looked at him, tilting his head up, his dark green eyes completely lucid. He placed his hands on Tony's shoulders firmly. "You have courted the darkness," he said. "I'm not asking for anything more." He ignored his pounding heart. "Keep your mortal life. I am not asking for it. This is nothing more than an agreement, a convenience of desire." He released Tony, stepping back. "I am asking for nothing more," he said, dissipating from the dream world and leaving Tony behind.

"Yes you are," Tony muttered to himself, thinking of Loki that morning in Tony's shirt. "You're an awful liar."

Chapter End Notes

(This is a frostiron ship, but I feel it's untrue to Tony's character to disregard Pepper entirely, and it was something that this story has to address in context with First Frost).

A Bell That Chimes

"You look like hell." Clint's voice came from across the kitchen, blunt and clipped.

"While we appreciate your interest, Stark Industries is not taking unsolicited input at this time," Tony said in the most bored tone he could muster, walking past Clint and fumbling with the coffee pot. Ah. Empty. Of course.

"Seriously," Clint said. "What happened? Something with your experiment?"

"No," Tony said, pouring water into the coffee maker. "No problems with that, aside from the usual."

Clint shrugged, raising his mug up to his lips. He paused. "Why do you wanna make that thing anyway? It doesn't seem worth the time."

Tony hit the on switch. "Are you kidding? SHIELD will love it and I'm going to charge them out the ass for it."

Clint grinned, his gruff laugh constituting all of his reply. "Besides," Tony continued. "Think of what it would do for my security system."

"Yeah, well if you need somebody to try it out," Clint said, taking a few steps away, "don't look at me."

"Spoil sport," Tony said. He rubbed his eyes and glanced back over at the coffee maker. Still brewing. Clint studied the man a little closer in the interval.

"You sure you're okay?" Clint asked again.

Tony shrugged. "As okay as I've ever been."

"Alright, well, make sure you cover whatever it is up before Steve catches it. If he sees you he's going to flip shit."

"Well as tempting as that sounds, I'd rather not have his star spangled highness following me around like a mother hen for the next week," Tony said.

"Yeah, you and me both," said Clint.

For a while they stood in companionable silence, until the coffee maker beeped, signaling that it was ready. Tony poured himself a cup and headed down to his lab.

At first he just stared at the blueprints. He had done everything that he could think of to make the machine work, and yet, it had one major flaw. His mind was blank on how to fix it. Tony didn't blame Clint for not wanting to try out the machine. It had an unfortunate side effect. Its test subjects died.

Mice, so far. It was unpleasant.

If calibrated correctly, the machine should've been able to trap and hold anything, indefinitely. Theoretically, it warped space around the subject, holding them in place. It had been the most interesting component of the book that Loki had left him. Tony just couldn't figure out why it didn't work. True, it did hold its subjects in place, essentially trapping them, but they died shortly after. It

was supposed to hold them, inanimate, unchanged, indefinitely. Maybe Clint was right. What good was a machine that trapped things?

Tony sighed, pushing the blue prints aside. The machine wasn't a top priority. It was just the most interesting one.

He pulled up the scans of Loki's book up on his monitor. Maybe he just needed to read it again.

Loki mulled over the copied book in his hands, unaware that Tony had retained all of it. His hands glided over each page individually, twisting the ink from English back into runes. Loki took his time, thumbing through each page deliberately, enjoying the transition. Soon the book would be all his again, unfathomable to Tony, the way that he wanted it.

At last, when the process was finished, Loki leaned back in his desk chair, gently cracking his spine. He stretched his arms upward, moaning. For a moment he just sat there, tilted back uncomfortably, staring up at the chandelier above him. Its eerie purple hue glared down at him, haughty.

With a sigh Loki straightened back up, looking down at his desk. He pressed his finger tips over the woodgrain, dragging his long nails down against the dilapidated varnish, drawing up very tiny curls of wood in the trails behind them. For a while he sat there, running his fingers back and forth. He needed a distraction.

But he didn't want to leave the room, either. The room was secure, safe. Even in his bed elsewhere, he felt less at home. It was only in this dank room that he felt at ease, and boredom was a fine price to pay for that. Loki lifted another book up off the shelf. He wished adamantly for it to put him somewhere else, in another state of mind.

He had read all the books in the room already, of course. Still, he wished.

For a while the fairy tale kept his mind at bay, though he did not fail to remember that the book had once been a favorite of his and Thor. When they were children, of course. Occasionally Loki brushed his thumb against his bottom lip, muttering to himself about the different passages. Then he heard a bell chime. By magic, the sound came from afar. Someone was calling him.

A Place That I Left

Loki knew the sound well. It came from the royal realm of Asgard. He stood, changing his attire in the same motion. Rich robes of gold and green draped down over him, accentuating his lean frame with grace. He braided back his hair, tying the end with a thin green cord. He would answer the call, if only because he needed a distraction.

Instantly he stood in the grand hall, imposing only in its enormity, its sweeping gold arches. Loki scanned the room, looking for the one that called him.

He was surprised to find only his once mother, sitting in a far corner of the room. "I answer your call," he said, mumbling slightly. She gestured for him to walk towards her. He did so, if only to show authority in his step. He was not a child. He was not a child.

When he stood before her, she smiled, her features softening. "I have sought your presence," she said informatively, gesturing for him to sit down beside her.

"You have it," Loki answered.

"I should like to request it again," she said. "There is to be a celebration for your father," she ignored the breath that Loki sucked through his teeth, "and we would like it very much if both of our sons could be there."

With precarious patience Loki replied, "I cannot give it."

She smiled, lips closed, eye brows knitted in concern. "Loki, have your father and I not made it abundantly clear that we should like to see you again?"

"Yes," Loki snarled, "after making me pay for my accused sins. You have made that part abundantly clear."

"We would all like to see you," she said. "Sif and the warriors three would very much enjoy your counsel."

"Sif and the warriors three would sooner throw me under the bus than seek my counsel," Loki retorted. Frigga's eyes widened.

"I beg your pardon. Bus?"

Loki tensed. No one on Asgard used buses, let alone threw people under them. Would she know where the phrase came from? He hoped not. Damn Tony. "Forgive me for I have grown accustomed to untraveled corners of the realms and am perhaps, forgetting Asgard," Loki said, noting with satisfaction that Frigga was hurt by the distancing.

"I don't belong here," Loki continued, unaware that his voice was rising. "I never did." He stood to leave.

"Loki please, try," Frigga said, standing with authority. "You can redeem yourself, you can reclaim your standing in the eyes of Asgard, if only you will repent---"

"No," Loki said. "I won't. I don't need Asgard anymore. I don't need its punishments nor its affection. I care not what Asgard thinks of me," Loki shouted, a sense of relief flooding his chest in the same instant. He stepped further back. "I should have known better than to answer your call."

This is the last time that I do."

"Loki you can still change," Frigga said, finding her own anger.

"I already have," Loki said coldly.

Frigga sat back down. "You may take your leave," she said quietly. When she looked up he was gone.

Loki reappeared in his room, beside his familiar musty bookshelves and cobbled walls. He felt light for the first time in forever. "I don't need Asgard anymore," he heard himself saying. A thin smile played at his lips.

A Team That Stands Together

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

"What the fuck." The words came quickly and forcefully, sending the room into another wave of shock, if that were at all possible in the course of events that day.

Everyone just stared at Steve. Perfect, well mannered Steve. Cursing.

"Well that is something I never thought I'd see," Bruce muttered quietly.

"Understatement of the century," Clint said back to him from a few feet away. He leaned against the furthest wall of the tower's common room, where he could see everyone. Bruce was a few feet away on the sofa, tapping his foot ever so slightly. Beside him was Natasha, sitting on the arm of the sofa, her arms crossed defensively, feet ready to move.

Steve looked in Bruce and Clint's direction reproachfully. "What? You think I can't say those words?"

"Not without getting a time out," Tony said from one of the arm chairs.

"Shut up," Steve came back at him. "This is no time for your mouth."

For once Tony swallowed his retort. He knew he wasn't in a bargaining position, and frankly, Steve was scaring him a bit right now. It was Captain America standing in the middle of the room, arms crossed, spine straight. It was his team fanned out in front of him in various states of distress. Not Tony's.

"Why don't we all just take a vote," Clint said. "Everyone against it, raise your hand."

Five hands raised.

"Great. Let's go kick some ass," Clint said, ready to leave.

"You're forgetting someone," Natasha said, inclining her head towards the ceiling, implying one of the floors above them.

"Speaking of which, let's take care of that problem before I'm stuck repairing the entire building," said Tony.

From one to another they looked around the room, each trying to avoid taking responsibility. Naturally, it was Steve that had to step up. "I'll talk to him," Steve said.

"Maybe we could talk to him as a team," Bruce said quietly, his guilt getting the better of him. Tony glared daggers at him.

"Whatever we're going to do, we need to make the decision quickly," said Natasha. "I don't feel comfortable leaving him unsupervised."

"Yeah, you and me both," said Tony, thinking of the being stretched out across his bed right now. Natasha just nodded her head in response.

"Jarvis, call Thor down," Steve said.

They had barely been into their morning meeting when the day had twisted into chaos. Well, one being of chaos at least. The team had sat, fully assembled, including Thor, across the common room couches, listening to Steve drone on when they noticed that one of the empty chairs was suddenly occupied.

"Holy shit," Clint swore, jumping over the back of his own chair. Loki turned his head slowly, eyelids half obscuring his smug eyes.

"Hello," he said from the adjacent chair. "Miss me?"

"Not at all you sick fuck," Clint spluttered, his heart racing.

"Brother, what is the meaning of this," Thor said, already in the space between Clint and Loki.

Loki's eyes didn't rise to meet Thor's. Instead he glanced leisurely up towards the ceiling, relaxing back into the arm chair, spreading out his legs as though he were upon a throne. Tony felt paralyzed, watching the god not just a few feet away from him. How much would Loki reveal about them?

"I thought it appropriate to attend the morning meeting of residents," Loki said simply.

"And why would that be?" Clint said, trying to push past Thor, evidentially for better aim.

"Isn't it obvious," Loki said condescendingly, inclining his head towards Clint over a vicious smile. "I intend to reside here."

Clint went dumbstruck behind Thor, falling into the blond god's muscled arm that he'd been pushing against just seconds prior. Then he regained his senses. "No," he said. He looked over at Natasha. "No," he said, seeking her confirmation.

"I think we're going to need to discuss this first," the Black Widow replied diplomatically.

"Yeah," Clint shot back to Loki. "We're going to need to discuss this first."

"Fine," Loki shrugged, waving his hand dismissively. "I'll show myself upstairs. I know my way around," he said, voice heavy with implication. Tony felt his stomach drop. He knew right where Loki would go. He just hoped the team didn't pick up on anything.

"Right, well," Tony heard Steve saying. Tony had gotten lost in his own thoughts.

"Sorry," Bruce said. "But you need to sit this one out too. You've got just a little too much bias on the matter," he said to Thor.

Looking horrifically dejected, Thor turned. "Alright," he said. "I shall await your counsel."

"Thor is on his way down," Jarvis told Steve.

"Please sit down," Steve said when the god walked back in. Thor did so, although it was evident that he was not as agreeable as he had been just a few minutes before.

"What decision have you reached?" Thor asked, his temper cracking out slowly from behind a very thin facade.

"We can't let him stay," Steve said quietly. "It's not safe, and he has a long history of transgressions

against us, and---"

"He is my brother," Thor said, voice rising. "I can not turn him out into the streets."

"I'm sure he's not out on the streets," Tony chimed in, thinking of the little room with the kitschy chandelier that the trickster liked to frequent.

"My brother has denied my family," Thor said, his booming voice no doubt making its way up a few floors. "I cannot deny him this chance. With my aid he might still redeem himself, he might yet see reason again."

"No offense," Bruce said, "but Loki's mind is never going to see reason."

"I take offense to that," Thor said.

"Tony," Natasha said, making his heart slam into his chest. "You're working on that entrapment device right?"

"Yeah," Tony said. "But it doesn't work."

"No," Clint said, "It does work. Let's use it right now."

"Do you jest?" Thor said, directing his anger towards Clint.

"Can you fix it?" Natasha asked flatly.

"It's doubtful," Tony said.

"Yeah," Bruce said. "We've both looked at it. We just don't have the technological advancements to support it yet."

"Listen, I want to make the big guy happy too, but we can't count on that device. We don't have any insurance against Loki," Tony said, thinking of himself briefly. Well, maybe they did have a bargaining chip, but he'd rather not the team realize that. "We can't guarantee that he's not planning anything."

"I will take full responsibility for his actions," Thor said.

"You've done that before," Steve said. "It's too much to ask of you again. Don't you remember what he did the last time he came here?"

"Yes, but if I let this chance go, there might not be another," Thor said, raw and honest. "This is the first time that he's reached out."

Each member of the team sat there quietly, not wanting to be the one to tell Thor no.

"Could Jarvis monitor Loki?" Steve asked when the silence had gone on too long.

"Loki's compromised Jarvis before," Tony said. "I doubt it would be a challenge for him again."

Steve shook his head. "We have to consider the team," he said quietly.

"I shall give Loki a set of rules," Thor offered. "If he breaks them then you may do as you wish, but if he does not, he may stay here."

"Give the god of chaos rules," Bruce repeated.

"He may be the god of chaos but he is not beyond order," Thor said. "You do not know him as I do. I know there is good in him still. He is not a monster."

"Your loyalty is insane, you know that," said Clint. Thor did not answer him.

Steve crossed and uncrossed his arms and crossed them again. What was best for the team? What about Thor? Silence lagged on. "What would be the set of rules?" He asked Thor.

"If he harms any of you he is out," Thor said.

"That's simple enough, but he is more creative than that," Bruce said.

"If he harms any of you or gives you due reason to request his leave, then we shall give it counsel. If it is decided, he leaves."

Thor wasn't winning them over.

"What if he decides to play boardgames with our minds?" Clint said.

"I give you my word that he will not," Thor said.

"It's not your word that we're worried about," Clint said.

"My brother will be made aware of the expectations," Thor said. "I have laid forth the rules, do you have any suggestions?"

"Yeah," Clint said, "He can't touch my shit."

"Or come on our floors," said Bruce.

"Or spy on us," said Natasha.

"Fine," said Thor. "He must keep to designated areas."

"And if he slips up," Steve said, not believing the words coming from his mouth, "That's it. No second chances. We shouldn't even be doing this. I really don't like it."

"All of Asgard will thank you," Thor said.

"Tony, where should we put him?" Steve asked.

"The thirteenth floor has an open guest studio," Tony answered. Thor's eyes lit up. He was on the fourteenth. "We could give him that floor and the common areas I guess."

"And my floor as well," Thor said.

"Right. Well. You're a part of our team Thor so---" Steve ventured, not really sure how to say it. "We want to see you happy."

"Yeah, yeah. Tell the little shit that he can come down here," Clint said. Natasha glared reproachfully at him. "Fine. Tell Loki to get his ass down here."

"Jarvis," Tony said, authorizing the AI.

"Right away sir," the voice chirped back.

A few moments later Loki sauntered in through the doors, a slight swagger in his steps. He did not

speak to them. He just stood there, waiting on them.

"Brother," Thor began, but Steve cut in.

"Loki," he said, mustering as much authority into his voice as he could. "There are conditions on you staying here. If you put a single toe the slightest bit out of line, you will be out faster than you can think."

"That would be impossible," Loki replied. Steve scoffed.

"You may stay on the thirteenth floor. You are refined to that floor, Thor's, and the common areas. You cannot spy on other residents, and you cannot take their things," Steve relayed to him.

"Touch their things. Or take them," Clint corrected him.

"And you must not harm them in any way," Thor said.

"Fair enough," Loki said, his expression illegible.

"Alright, well," Steve let the words hang in the air. The room quickly emptied out, leaving just Loki and Thor behind. Tony didn't look over his shoulder as he left. This had completely blindsided him.

"Hey," Bruce said as they entered the hall, clamping an arm on Tony's shoulder reassuringly. "You alright? That guy really did a number on your psyche last time," he said as way of explanation.

Now that, Tony thought, was the understatement of the century.

"Yeah," Tony said. "Wanna come down to the lab with me? Maybe we can find something on the machine that we missed last time." Tony did not want to be alone.

"Sure," Bruce said, following him closely.

In the room behind them Thor approached Loki emphatically, only to catch a few scornful words followed by a wisp of emerald smoke as the dark haired god fled to the thirteenth floor above.

Chapter End Notes

Hey everyone! I wanted to take a moment to say thank you for the comments of encouragement you've been leaving, they're great motivators. There are a lot of turns this story has yet to take, I hope you'll enjoy them!

The Room That Became Mine

The unspoken thing about the thirteenth floor was that it was abandoned.

Not because the team was particularly superstitious, although that did perhaps play a part. It was just that in a sky scraper with a small handful of people living it, well, some of the space wasn't needed. Somehow, between its status as a guest floor and its unfortunate numerical positioning, the thirteenth floor had been forgotten. Aside from the weekly cleaning crew, no one set foot there. Even when the team did have guests staying, they always chose to stay on one of the other floors dedicated to visitors.

The team couldn't have avoided the floor any less even if a ghost had been living there.

Its new occupant was living however, even if he was a bit supernatural. When Loki first appeared in the room he found himself rather disappointed. He had grown accustomed to Tony Stark's sense of style, and had expected that the floor dedicated to him would have the standard Avengers Tower luxury, if not more.

Instead he found a dark studio. He had to prompt Jarvis to turn on the lights, and the AI sounded surprised, if such a thing were possible. There was a very thin layer of dust on the everything. The scent of professional grade cleaner still lingered in the air, the residue of months of consecutive weekly cleanings followed by nothing.

The main room of the studio was spacious, with a long line of windows looking out over the city. Other than that, there wasn't much to be said for it. There was one black sofa, a granite counter top with a sink and a few cabinets on the far side of the room, and a few smaller rooms to the side. Loki turned around. So the elevator came up the the main studio room then. He wondered if there was a way to prevent it from coming.

"Jarvis," he said.

"Yes Mr. Laufeyson."

"Make it so that the lift cannot reach this room."

The AI system laughed. "I am not permitted to do so."

"And why not?"

"I have a small set of commands that I may give you access to. Overriding the elevator is not one of them."

Loki decided to move the one piece of furniture in front of the doors instead.

That left him with an empty, sterile room. Time to check out the adjacent rooms.

He poked his head around the corner of the door frame closest to him. A black tiled bathroom. Black tub, black sink, gold fixtures. Well, that could stay.

The next room was not so agreeable. It was a bedroom, undoubtedly, but it had one window that filled the room needlessly with light, and the bed frame was missing its mattress. Otherwise, there was no furniture. He supposed whatever had been there originally had been poached for other purposes.

Loki sat down on the empty bed frame. Why did this disappoint him? He hadn't realized that he had come to the tower with expectations. Certainly not ones that could result in disappointment. Well, it was no matter.

Getting them to agree was the hardest part of his plan, after all. The rest would be easy.

He snapped his fingers, magicking in a mattress of such fine quality that Tony would've been embarrassed. At least, Loki hoped so. He laid back in the bed, staring up at the dull ceiling. It occurred to him that Thor was probably somewhere above him at that moment. Well, at least it was better than adjacent, as it had been in their childhood. Tony was above him too, although Loki knew that they were more than a dozen floors apart.

Loki's attention drifted back towards the empty studio.

He smiled, a genuine, private smile. He stretched out his arms wide, then slowly pulled himself up.

Walking into the empty space, his mind was alive with possibility. There was so much that he could do with this space, and it was the perfect opportunity. He let the magic crackle from his fingertips, a capricious spark of energy before the more refined work.

Loki started with ceiling, installing a new chandelier of sharp, icicle like crystalline rods in a river pattern leading from the elevator doors towards the center and the left side wall. There he put a fire place with enchanted flames. On the walls beside it he put bookshelves, and two dark black arm chairs, the backs of which were so high that they looked eerily off putting. The floor beneath his feet turned to marble, a thick black and gold rug laid across portions of it. An intricate pattern detailed the rug like a tapestry, illustrating tales older than Midgard.

The windows directly across the room couldn't be changed, but it was no matter. At night the light from the chandelier would glow, leading like a celestial stream towards the electric star sky of city lights. Right at the center of the room he put a high backed chair with long arms that was elevated a little higher than the rest of the room. Around his chair he arranged the company of one armed black sofa with the same high back as the rest of the furniture, along with an oval coffee table and two arm chairs. On the table he placed a tiny potted plant with dark green leaves. The room was simple but impressive in its detail, and certainly intimidating. He looked back at the counter and sink of the back wall. Aside from changing their color to suit the room he left them untouched. He had no real need of them, or interest for that matter.

Calmly he walked towards that center chair, enjoying the press of his feet in the new rug. He lowered himself into that chair, making himself comfortable. For a few moments he watched the elevator, noting with amusement that the old black sofa was still before it. That could stay there for now. He smiled privately again, leaning his head back into the chair, exposing his neck. His arms felt strong resting out beside him. Muscles relaxing, he closed his eyes, sinking further into the chair. Throne. For a moment he was home.

The One That Has My Back

"You're not worried about it, are you?" Clint asked the red head in his lap flatly. She closed her eyes as he ran a hand through her hair.

"Worried is too strong a word. I'm interested." She looked up at Clint, his shoulders rigid against the headboard. He was certainly worried. That was why she had come to his floor and crawled her way into his bed, pushing the gun he had been polishing aside and laying down in his lap with a book in her hands. She wasn't going anywhere. Clint wasn't going to challenge her on that anyway. He had just sighed and put the gun down on his nightstand and started playing with her hair instead.

"It makes me sick," he said.

"I know," she said quietly.

"I hope that Steve knows what he's doing."

"I hope that Thor knows what he's doing."

Clint grinned a little. "Did I tell you about the time Thor tore right through SHIELD? It was something else. He even surprised Coulson."

"I wish I could've seen it. I was too busy babysitting Stark. I kicked his ass boxing. You would've enjoyed that."

"God would I have," Clint said, really smiling for the first time since that morning. Natasha watched the joy play out on his lips for a while, slightly relieved. If there was something that she was worried about, it was Clint. She had outsmarted Loki before, she was certain that she could do it again. But Clint hadn't been given the chance at outsmarting Loki, and she didn't know what living with his once captor would do to Clint. So she just decided that she would be with Clint as much as possible, and hope that Thor could straighten out his tangled brother in the meantime. Not that she didn't have plans for what she'd do to the bastard if he stepped the slightest bit out of line.

"You've got that look on your face," Clint said.

Natasha glanced up at him.

"What are you planning?" He said playfully.

"Nothing," she said, a tiny grin tugging at the corners of her full lips.

"Is it a plan for who I think it is?"

"Probably," Natasha mused.

"Well, don't do anything to the bastard without including me in on it."

"Of course," she said. Then she sighed and let a particularly bloody thought go. She was trying to get past those things. It was alright to make exceptions though, right? Surely Loki qualified as an exception.

"Hey, did you see Tony's face today when he was leaving the meeting?" Clint asked.

"When he was leaving, and when you-know-who appeared." She paused, biting down on her lip slightly. Clint waited, knowing the value of her insights all too well. "He was definitely surprised, but he was also...frightened. And annoyed."

"Do you blame the guy? Tony got it worse than anyone the last time that psycho showed up."

Natasha closed her eyes again, waiting for Clint to stroke her hair. "Yes, but don't you think it's strange for him to be annoyed?"

"Not really."

"Well, we were all surprised. It was unexpected. So that reaction is normal. So is his fear. I'm sure he'd never admit it, but it shook Tony up to have someone manipulate him so seamlessly. Tony's used to being in control and having the upper hand. Intellectually, at least. But the annoyance? It doesn't put Tony out at all to house Loki. It's not like he needs the space. He might be annoyed that we're asking him to get that machine of his working, which is difficult. Or the annoyance might be from something else, I just don't know what."

Anxiety was still gnawing at Clint too voraciously for him to enjoy Natasha's analysis like he usually did. At one time he had told her that if she wanted a civilian life psychology would be lucky to have her. Right now he was just glad that she was on their side instead.

"Do you think that Thor will get through to him?"

"No," Natasha said softly.

Silence wrapped comfortably around them. Clint knew he was too worked up to fall asleep or do anything else. Different scenarios, each more gruesome than before, floated up into his mind unsolicited. He was immensely grateful for the woman with him. He continued to gently run his hands through her short hair while struggling to deny the unwanted thoughts. Natasha returned to reading her book, intent on staying up through the night with the restless archer.

One That Listens

"We can't get anything else done today, Tony," Bruce said, exasperated. They had been in the lab for fourteen hours now, running the same scenarios as before.

Tony pushed back the design he was working on.

"Come on," Bruce said. "Why don't we grab some coffee or some fresh air or anything." He grinned sheepishly, hoping that Tony would acquiesce.

He was fortunate. Tony's shoulders softened and he pulled himself up out of his desk chair, stretching. "Alright."

"I'm sure it won't last long," Bruce said once they were out on the city streets. Rain lingered in the air, mixed with smog and exhaust.

"What won't?" Tony asked.

"Loki," Bruce said, watching Tony's reaction closely.

"Who knows what that son of a bitch will do," Tony said without much force.

Bruce kicked a can out of the way. "I'll be surprised if he's still here next week," he said.

"Why's that?"

"Well," Bruce said, "Loki doesn't exactly seem like the domestic type. I don't know what it is that he wants, but I'm sure he'll leave as soon as he gets it."

Tony gulped, certain that half of Manhattan could hear the sound.

They had arrived at a 24 hour coffee shop. Tony opened the door, holding it open for Bruce. The barista smiled up at them and took their orders without much interest. The two men took their cups and settled down at a table by the window.

"It probably has to do with Thor," Bruce continued. Tony took a sip out of his coffee, avoiding eye contact. Tony was fairly certain that he knew what Loki was after. "I doubt it has to do with you," Bruce continued, making Tony choke.

"Because?" He said between coughing up coffee.

"Look at it this way," Bruce said as gently as he could. "Loki's already had his fun manipulating you. Faking that poisoning to get close to you? He didn't come back to do the same thing twice. So, my bet is that he's after Thor. Again."

"What makes you so certain?" He watched Bruce closely, praying that his friend had insight that he'd overlooked.

Bruce leaned back in the chair. "He's still got family issues, for one thing. They both do."

Tony shrugged. "Yeah, that's for sure."

"I wonder though if we're doing wrong by Thor by enabling it though. No one really thinks that Loki's going to change. Besides Thor. Maybe it's cruel to give him that hope."

"Yeah," Tony said noncommittally.

"Anyway, the point is," Bruce said, "don't worry. He's not after you and we won't let anything happen to you."

"Are you trying to tell me that the team is worried about me?" Tony said, trying to be as dismissive as possible. "I don't need babysitters. Do I need to remind you all that you're in my tower?"

Bruce just grinned and looked away, unbothered.

"I'm serious," Tony said.

"Oh, we know," Bruce said sarcastically. But Tony really couldn't find it in himself to be mad.

"There's another something that I've been meaning to ask you," Bruce said. "Where did those scans come from again?"

"Stolen from SHIELD stolen from foreign intelligence. Like I told you, I consider it a SHIELD benefits payment."

Bruce shook his head, unable to disguise his amusement. "Right. Well, have you considered it might be wrong? We've tried everything. Soon we're going to have to start asking ourselves if it's just bad intel."

But so much of the book had been right. Had it been possible that Loki had deliberately planted bad information? Tony considered it. That was a good possibility. Not that he wanted to ask the god. "We got so far on the design though."

"Yeah, but I think we've hit a wall. You could just sell it back to SHIELD as is. I'm sure they've got their own forces working on something similar if they have those scans. And it won't bother them if the machine happens to kill its subject."

Tony sighed. Bruce was right of course. If the information had actually come from SHIELD and not Loki, they probably would've designed a similar device already. He felt a twinge of guilt. What would Bruce do if he found out about Tony and Loki?

Tony hoped that he never had to find out. A rush of annoyance cascaded over him again. Why the fuck did Loki have to show up now? Couldn't the god just be content to keep things as they were? Living together was definitely not a part of their arrangement. "I want him out of my house," Tony said suddenly, taking himself by surprise.

"You and me both," Bruce said. He tipped his mug up against his lips, taking a slow drink of coffee. He felt a little sorry for Tony. The whole team did, actually. Of course, they would never ever tell him.

"So, what did you think of that article in the Scientific American on solar wind?" Bruce asked.

Tony lit up, happy to steer the conversation elsewhere. They stayed in the shop for a few hours, talking about everything but what was bothering Tony. When they returned to the tower in the early morning hours, Tony was careful to avoid any common areas. Against his better judgement he fervently hoped that Bruce was right, and that Loki was just there as a part of another one of his tiffs with Thor. For a moment he worried for the blond god's safety, but then thought better of it. They'd been going on like this for a thousand years already, he was sure that they'd be going on for a few thousand more.

Regrets That I Had

Steve was up early. He always was. At five in the morning he woke up, made breakfast, and headed down to the gym. Everyday. So he had grown accustomed to waking up and having breakfast alone.

That morning, however, he came downstairs to find the kitchen light on and a large form arched over the table, lost in thought. He paused for a moment before walking in slowly, his feet echoing softly on the ground. Thor did not look up.

Steve pulled out a chair and sat down beside him. "You wanna talk about it?"

Thor let out a long sigh. "I have nothing new to say on the matter."

"Yeah, well. I imagine a few hundred years'll do that to a guy." Thor relaxed a little at Steve's remark.

"Certainly."

"So I take it he's not come around yet," Steve said, putting his arm around the back of his chair.

"He will not grant me permission even to speak to him," Thor said. "I do not know the meaning of his coming here, and I do worry of his tricks."

Steve let a wave of annoyance go. Thor was confiding in him. He didn't mean to remind Steve of his own concerns. Steve felt the weight of responsibility crushing down on him. If something happened because of Loki, it would be on him. Regardless of what Thor thought.

"Yeah, well," Steve said, not sure what to say. "Well. It's the chance that counts, right?"

Thor nodded.

Quietly he said, "two weeks ago my mother sought his counsel and when Loki answered her call he renounced all of Asgard."

Steve fidgeted in his chair. "Like---"

"He means he no longer considers himself one of us." Thor released a heavy sigh and looked up for the first time since their conversation had begun. "Often Loki has voiced disappointment in the order of the throne. I thought he wished to take our father's place someday, but with his announcement, he has rescinded any intention to rule Asgard." Thor sat back in his chair. "I find it difficult to guess my brother's intentions at the best of times, but I find it especially difficult now."

"So this throne thing," Steve said, "do you think he really means it?"

"Yes," Thor said. "I do. To be honest, I did not expect to see my brother again after my mother told me."

Steve thought about Thor in the past few weeks. He had no idea of the burden the god had been carrying. He wondered just how much Thor kept to himself.

The captain tried thinking of something to say when Thor said, "You have no idea of the gratitude I feel for your willingness to keep him here. I have not been given an opportunity like this to reach Loki in a very long time."

Steve shrugged, feeling a little guilty. "No problem," he said. "I just hope some good comes out of it."

Thor smiled sadly. "I am glad we are comrades," he said.

"Yeah, me too," said Steve quickly. He looked over at the counter. "Want breakfast?" Thor nodded enthusiastically. Steve returned to his usual morning routine, with the exception of portion sizes.

"Thor," he said over the sizzle of eggs on the stove, "Is there anything we can do to help you with Loki?"

Thor considered his question so thoroughly that Steve had turned back to the stove and forgotten when his reply came. "Listen to him," Thor said softly. "I fear if I had listened to him more closely, this fate might have been avoided."

The tall blond turned around quickly from the stove. "Thor, there is nothing you could've done to change Loki," he said forcefully. "Don't blame yourself for what's happened."

"I should have been a better brother," Thor said simply.

"Is that what this is about?" Steve said. "Look, I don't know everything that's happened between you," he admitted. "But from what I've seen around here, when it counts you're there. We depend on you. So I'm sure Loki could too if he wanted. Now maybe Loki will surprise us and come around this time, but if he doesn't Thor, that's not on you." Steve switched the stove off forcefully and grabbed the frying pan. "Don't blame yourself. Trust me. That gets you nowhere." Silently he began to huffily make up the two plates, and Thor watched him silently. "I mean it," Steve said, slamming down a plate in front of Thor and tossing the pan in the sink. "Regret isn't going to get you anywhere."

"You are probably right," Thor said, perhaps to make his friend happy. Steve pulled out a chair with force and sat down.

"I mean it," Steve repeated. "If you need something we're here." He scooped up a forkful of eggs and shoved it into his mouth irritably. Thor watched his friend chew with anger until Steve looked at him reproachfully and he had to look away. "I mean it," Steve said again when his mouth was empty.

"Thank you," Thor said, slowly helping himself to the eggs on his plate.

"I'm sure something will work out anyway," Steve mumbled.

"I hope you are right," Thor agreed.

The World That Starts to Turn

Morning breakfast was eventful, to put it lightly.

Around eleven, when Tony finally climbed his way out of the reaches of sleep, he fumbled around to the kitchen, forgetting the new rules in his haze. Natasha and Clint were both seated at the table, quietly chatting with Bruce, who seemed to be in a pleasant mood. As were Thor and Steve, who had returned from a sparring match in the gym.

Tony just poured himself a cup of coffee and wandered over to the table, where he put his head down.

"Long night?" Natasha said, quietly amused.

Tony lifted his face up just enough to make eye contact. He was thinking of something pithy to say when he remembered going out for coffee with Bruce, and the day before. Shit. He settled for glaring condescendingly, his thoughts on an exit strategy. The kitchen was considered a common area.

Tony stood, picking up his coffee. "I think I need a little more beauty sleep." He turned, smacking full force into something.

Hot coffee splattered all over his shirt. "God damn it," Tony swore through clenched teeth. He looked up. Loki's surprised eyes in a peculiar shade of celery green greeted him. "Fucking A," Tony said, stepping to the side of the god and setting his mug on the kitchen counter. Hurriedly he left the room, cursing himself. Loki watched him go, unable to follow. He straightened and recalculated his face before turning around to face the team.

Four hardened faces greeted him. Thor only looked embarrassed. Spitefully, Loki felt like he was in his youth again.

"Smooth move," Clint said from the table.

"Actually it was rather---"Loki began correcting him.

"It's called sarcasm," Clint said, borrowing Loki's condescension from the day before.

Loki flashed him a fake smile viciously and began considering his options.

"Why don't you take a seat," Steve said, gesturing to the open one beside Thor. Loki reeled. Clint scrapped his chair noisily away from the spot and grinned over at Loki.

"Yeah," he said. "Why don't you take a seat? Or are you scared?" Clint said, pulling his arms up into comical v's. Had Loki been capable of getting the reference, he would've recognized it as the chicken dance. It was Natasha's peal of laughter that made him sit down instead. He wasn't sure what was going on, but he knew that refusing would be a loss.

"Brother, would you care for some coffee," Thor said cordially once Loki had seated himself in the chair, lowering down into it as though he expected it to be covered in insects.

"No," Loki said shortly.

"So, what do you do in your free time," Steve said to Loki, for Thor's benefit.

"Free time," Loki repeated.

"You know," Clint said. "When you need a break from terrorizing."

Loki ran a hand through his hair. "Read mostly," he said dismissively.

"Oh? What kinds of books do you read?"

This small talk was killing Loki, it really was. "Reading books," Loki said.

"He probably doesn't even know how to read," Clint said.

"You sniveling mortal," Loki snarled towards Clint. "It surprises me greatly that you can even walk upright---" He felt Thor nudge him softly under the table. "What is the meaning of---"he turned, focusing on the blond god who was looking pointedly away.

"So Loki," Bruce said quickly, "Maybe you could tell us a little more about yourself. It's an Earth thing, we like knowing who we live with," he said, biting back a million snide remarks that he wanted to tag on.

"What do you wish to know," Loki said tersely.

"Do you drink baby blood?" Clint asked, swearing when Natasha poked him under the table.

"How about sports?" Steve said.

"No," the perturbed immortal responded.

"Hey, why don't we have a little game to get acquainted with Loki?" Clint said. "We could play dodgeball."

"What is this jest---" Loki said, looking to Thor for explanation.

Bruce talked over him. "I actually like that idea."

"Guys, I don't know if it's a good idea," Steve said.

"A friendly game of sport is well respected on Asgard," Thor boomed, excitement catching hold. "We would gladly accept your challenge."

"We," Loki said like a swear.

"Brother, it would be most disrespectful to deny the Midgardians this gesture of goodwill."

"I am not---"Loki said.

"We would take great offense to it," Natasha said quickly, catching wind of a weakness in Loki. "We might even see it as an unforgivable offense and deny your residing here."

Loki's mouth opened and closed minutely. "What entails this dodge-ball?" He said calmly.

"Basically we throw balls at each other until someone gets hit," Clint said. "No magic," he added. Loki looked unimpressed.

"I'm beginning to feel gravely offended," Bruce said quietly.

"Me too, me too," Clint said.

"Please brother, you must," Thor said, imploring Loki.

"Fine," Loki said with a snarl.

Tony returned to his room, immensely grateful that the god had been unable to follow him. He wouldn't make the same mistake again. Even if he had the worst hangover of his life, he wouldn't make that mistake. The common areas were off limits to Tony from now until forever.

He was laying in bed when a thought occurred to him.

"Jarvis, pull up a live feed of Loki's room."

"Certainly, sir."

The flat screen snapped to life. "Holy shit," Tony said, taking in the room's redecoration. It was fucking gorgeous. He hated to admit it, but the god had style. Yet he didn't see Loki. "Jarvis, is Loki in his room?"

"No, sir."

"And where would he be, Jarvis?"

"In the gym, sir."

Tony suppressed a laugh. "The gym?"

"The team has assembled to play dodgeball, sir."

"Jarvis," Tony said slowly. "If there is ever a dodgeball game involving the god of mischief and my team, you alert me immediately. You got that?"

"Yes," Jarvis said, putting it on the screen just in time for Tony to watch a red ball slam into Loki's face. In the background Natasha bit back a shit-eating grin.

"That means you're out," Steve said.

"Gladly," Loki said, heading for the exit.

"Wait," Steve called after him. Loki turned to listen, though he declined to speak.

"It's not over until your team is completely out. So, we've got Natasha vs Thor and then it'll be over." Loki inclined his head slightly and leaned back against one of the walls to watch. Natasha had speed and agility on her side, but Thor had precision and power. It wasn't a long match, but Tony was amazed to see interest lingering in Loki's features. Could it be possible that he was enjoying the match?

Thor hit Natasha's ankle, bringing the game to a close. "Not bad," she said from across the floor line.

"Damn it," Clint said.

"What?" Thor said.

"You won," Clint said, looking at Loki.

"Nice job," Natasha said in Loki's direction.

Thor was positively beaming. "Come over here," he called over to the being sulking against the wall. When Loki declined the team just moved over there, hitting each other on the shoulders in congratulation.

"You got Clint pretty good," Bruce said to Loki, enjoying his teammate's indigence.

"Lucky shot," Clint said.

"Maybe you can make up for it in another game," Steve said to him.

"Maybe? You KNOW I will," Clint said.

"Really," Bruce teased him. They broke into familiar laughter.

Loki watched them, a curious expression tucked under his features.

Tony sat back from the monitor, unsure of what he was seeing. A headache screeched into his brain. What in the hell was Loki up to? And just what was his team thinking? When had things gotten out of control?

A Guest That Came to Breakfast

He ran his thumb across his chin, his dark eyes lost in thought from the chair he had slinked across. As deplorable as that little ball game had been, it had helped him reach a decision. Now he knew who the weakest link was.

Always take out the easiest target first. That was rule number one.

In his book, at least. He would take his time with the more complicated ones. That would be fun. Easy was boring, and he didn't come to be bored.

His foot flinched involuntarily from the chair arm he was hanging it over. He sunk down deeper into the chair, pushing slick hair back from his face. The ends had curled up today. He glanced back over to the windows, the sprawling city lights outside. Well, if he did get bored, there would be plenty of distractions.

Now that he had reached a decision, plans threaded together in his mind seamlessly. It came naturally, and took him little time. Thus, he had more than enough time to consider another problem.

How could he stop Tony from avoiding him?

It was true that Tony was avoiding him, but not entirely. Tony had one monitor up, keeping an eye on the brooding god. He told himself that it was for research purposes, to ascertain the true reason that Loki had come there. Tony Stark wasn't stupid, though. He knew he had less than honorable reasons for keeping that screen open.

Still, he kept his resolution. That night Tony fell asleep alone, unless you counted the shots he'd taken to beg sleep to take him.

Loki welcomed sleep. He was disappointed to find that Tony was avoiding him in dreams as well. And Tony was getting good at it. Loki was mildly surprised by the mortal man's progress, and mildly proud of him. Navigating the world of dreams was a realm of emotion, not reason, and did not lend itself easily to the scientifically inclined.

In the early morning Loki awoke in his bed with a start, intrigue rattling through him. It was time for the games to start.

For the second time that week Steve came downstairs to find the kitchen lights on and someone waiting for him.

"Uh. Loki. I wasn't expecting you," Steve said, trying his absolute best to be polite despite every instinct in his body contesting that decision.

"Few do," Loki said quietly. He gestured towards the coffee pot. "I brewed that already. If you please."

Steve considered that for a moment and then walked quietly towards the pot, pouring a cup, and sniffing it, subtly he hoped. "I didn't poison it, if that's what your concern is," Loki said from the

table. Steve turned around bashfully.

"No, of course not," he said, setting it down on the table. "I'm going to make eggs," he said, hopping across the words like they were double dutch. "Would you like some?"

"It would be my pleasure," Loki said, his voice a warm coo, gliding insidiously from a cold face.

"Alright then," Steve said, immediately turning back around and trying to make a simple dish into a complicated process to avoid his guest. Loki watched him with detachment. Steve cracked each egg slowly and dropped their contents into a glass bowl. He reached for a whisk, his mind drifting to Thor the previous morning as the whisk hit the sides of the bowl, tinkling against it in pitiful protest. What had Thor said? Listen?

"So, Loki," he said, not looking up from the eggs, "anything on your mind?"

"Yes actually," Loki said, and Steve had the very distinct feeling that the trickster wanted to make eye contact with him. He poured the eggs into a frying pan and turned the heat down instead. "I'm certain my presence here is a burden to you," he said softly.

Now he had the eye contact he desired. "I'm sure you have a reason for it," Steve guessed, trying to sound uncritical.

Loki looked down at the table, tracing a finger across it. "I feel quite unwell about how some things have transpired between my brother and I." He stared at his well groomed nail, fully aware on the captain's trained vision on him. "I don't suppose you know how it feels to be weak, but in my youth, my position was very much different."

Steve turned back and began to fumble around nosily for dishes in the cabinet.

"I envied Thor horribly, all of his power and strength. No one kicked him around."

"Yeah?" Steve said, slamming a plate down on the counter. Loki wasn't sure if it was working or not. Delicately, the captain sliced the pan of eggs in half, pushing the left side onto Loki's plate.

"I thank you," Loki said when Steve placed it before him.

"You're welcome," Steve said pointedly, sitting down across from the god. They were quiet for a moment. "If you think your being picked on makes it okay for you to push everyone else around now, you've got another thing coming," he said tersely.

"Not at all---"

"When you're strong, you've gotta stand up for the weak ones. Not become the bully that tormented you." Steve scraped up a pile of eggs onto his fork, causing the twines to screech against the ceramic.

Ah, a slight miscalculation.

Loki smiled thinly, perceiving it to be warmer than it was. "You and my brother are not that unlike. Perhaps you can offer me counsel on how I might...better things."

Steve took a bite of his eggs and stared at Loki, chewing slowly. With a loud gulp he swallowed, eyes still locked on the trickster. "Thor would be very happy to fix things between you. Why don't you just talk to the guy?"

"It's not that simple," Loki said, laying on the regret a little too heavily for Steve's taste.

"Yeah, well have you tried?" As soon as the words left his lips Steve felt a tiny twinge of tactlessness. Listen. Not judge. "I mean," he said, trying to brush it off.

"I am afraid our customs on Asgard are not the same as here."

Steve shrugged and took a sip from his coffee. So far, no poison, no strange twitching or blacked out vision. He let out a sigh. Across from him Loki cut his eggs into neat, bite sized portions that he lifted up to his mouth with grace on a delicately held fork. Steve watched him meticulously section off the bits of egg and eat them systematically. Really. "Can I ask you why you decided to come live here?"

Loki set down his fork. "I, I suppose I thought I might better understand Thor's choices if I lived among his...comrades."

"Why now?" Steve asked. "You do live forever, right?"

"Something like that," Loki said, scoffing slightly. "I'm not a monster," he said, looking up at Steve. "I do have regrets. I don't wish to carry on in discord forever."

"The god of chaos doesn't want discord," Steve said, repeating Loki more than anything else.

"Just a title," Loki said swiftly. "We're fond of them."

"Okay." Steve didn't think he was getting anywhere. "Well, I really think you should try and talk to Thor if you want to patch things up between you guys." He debated getting up. His plate was empty, and he didn't exactly want to be having this heart to heart with Loki, but if he left he'd be disappointing Thor. And it would be rude to just go.

Loki traced the rim of his own coffee mug, seemingly lost in thought.

"Hey," Steve said. "Uh, if there's something I can do for you and Thor, just tell me." He crossed his arms. "If it would help fix things between you and all."

"I greatly appreciate that offer," Loki said, a toothy grin unveiling itself between parted lips. "I may take you up on it."

"Yeah, well. Thor's a part of our team."

"Tony was wrong about you. You are far more thoughtful than he implied."

"When were you talking to Tony?"

"The last time I was here, when Tony saved me. I'm sorry. It must've been told to me in confidence and I misunderstood. I only meant to compliment your insight and I misspoke."

Steve sat back in his chair, uncertain of what to believe. He knew Loki was a liar, but that didn't stop an old conflict from wedging its way back up again. It wasn't like he'd put it past Tony to call him a mindless soldier behind his back.

"I'll take your plate for you," Steve said, pulling it across the table. He threw the empty dishes in the sink and turned back towards Loki, still sitting at the table.

"I greatly appreciate your willingness to listen to me," Loki said, standing up. "It's not a luxury I often get to enjoy."

"Not a big deal," Steve said from behind narrowed eyes.

"I'm afraid I have intruded on your morning too long. Pardon me," Loki said, walking to the elevator.

It was a little funny, Steve realized, to watch Loki waiting for an elevator.

Then again, it was an elevator in his home, and considering that it was Loki, it wasn't very funny at all.

A Thought That Must Be Considered

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

"You mind if we go upstairs and make lunch?" Bruce said impatiently.

"I'll just order pizza in," Tony said from over a machine he was working on.

"No. I have had enough artery clogging garbage for one week. I'm going to go upstairs and make something that won't kill me in a few years," Bruce said, standing up from his computer chair. "Are you gonna come or just hide yourself away in here again?"

Tony sat up straight, setting down a wrench. "Have you considered that I am just hiding from your hummus laced cardboard creations?"

Bruce rolled his eyes to remarkable effect.

"I'm serious, I'm concerned. What if that stuff gets lodged in your arteries because it can't break down? You should really have some pizza."

"Tony," Bruce said. "It'll be fine. You shouldn't be the one living like a prisoner in your own home."

Tony grimaced. Funny, how Loki could accomplish something like that.

"I'd just rather not," Tony said.

"Nobody blames you, but it might help. If Clint can play dodgeball with the guy and Steve can have breakfast with him---"

"Steve did what?"

"He had breakfast with Loki."

"What? So they're pals now?" Tony said, a tiny bit of jealousy flaring up.

Bruce fidgeted with his glasses. "Actually, Steve seems to be warming up to him a little. He showed Loki how to work the TV the other day. It was touching, actually, considering that Steve just mastered using the different remotes."

Tony couldn't bring himself to fake a smile. "Steve shouldn't be doing that."

"Yeah, well, until his royal highness gets out of here, Steve's probably going to be spending a lot of time with him. He feels responsible to Thor." Bruce shrugged and looked back over towards the elevator. It was definitely time for lunch.

"Fine," Tony said, standing up. "I'll come with you. But only because I want a word with Steve."

Bruce just took his quiet grin with him and walked towards the elevator. Tony cleaned his hands of oil and met his friend at the elevator, clearly annoyed.

Tony's heart started to beat faster as the elevator rose, dinging as they passed each floor. If Bruce noticed he attributed it to the general state of discontent that Tony had been in since the god of

mischievous arrival.

The doors chimed and slid open, revealing an empty kitchen. Tony let out a sigh of relief and walked over to the refrigerator. Pulling out a packet of frozen burritos, he set the microwave and stepped back to disdainfully watch Bruce make a health salad.

"Shove it," Bruce said, popping open a pack of almonds.

"What? I was just considering how it must feel to be rabbit."

"Funny," Bruce replied. "I was just wondering how it must feel to be a wedge of cheese."

"It feels quite good, actually," Tony said. "Feels better with some booze. Speaking of which," Tony said, opening up the cabinet. He'd been unable to reach his stash of alcohol since the kitchen had become common room territory. He pulled out a bottle of scotch. "I missed you," he said quietly.

The microwaved buzzed. Tony turned around and took out the hot plate, balancing it with the bottle of scotch on one arm. "Back to the lab?"

"Hold on," Bruce said, opening the refrigerator back up. Tony sighed, watching his friend push aside bottles, looking for a blended fruit juice. When he was successful he closed the door. "Okay, we can go before the boogeyman shows up," he said.

Tony had nothing to come back with. He just hit the down button for the elevator impatiently.

"Pressing it doesn't make it come any faster," Bruce said.

"I know, I designed it," Tony said.

Da-ding.

The doors opened and Tony's heart dropped. There was his god, more ravishing than ever. In his forced absence, Tony had grown less accustomed to seeing Loki, making him less resistant to the god's charm. Yes, it was certainly Loki, standing in Tony's elevator, clad in tight leather and boots.

Bruce stepped in front of Tony, pushing him backwards a little. Loki noticed. He definitely noticed.

"Coming up for lunch?" He said kindly, gesturing for the trickster to move past them.

"Just to make tea. Would you care to join me?" He said, eyes fixed on Tony.

"Maybe another time. We've got tests running, we have to go," Bruce said. "But you go ahead. Don't let us stop you." He smiled benignly.

Loki stepped out of the elevator, making room for them. Bruce felt Loki's eyes scanning his every feature, attentive. Behind him Tony noticed too, not interpreting it as a threat, like Bruce did, but for what it really was---jealousy.

Bruce pushed Tony forward with his shoulder, smiling broadly at Loki. "There's some Darjeeling in the cabinet, you should try it," he said, stepping in after Tony.

"I will," Loki said, his voice crafted and level. "Thank you for the recommendation."

"No problem," Bruce said, hitting a button to close the doors. The last thing he saw was Loki, dark eyes unhinging before him, memorizing his features with poorly concealed rage. In his focus, Loki failed to notice the bags under Tony's eyes, how he cringed minutely away.

He did notice, however, Tony's eyes dilating with renewed interest.

"Jesus," Bruce said once they were a few floors down. "Is it his off day or what?"

Tony pushed out a breath with force through his nose. "Something like that," he said.

"Yeah, well when the cats start pouring out of his ears, I'm going to be the one saying I told you so," Bruce said, leaning back against the wall.

Tony considered that. "Loki's mind isn't so much a bag of cats, but maybe a circus of them. All trained and disciplined, but at the end of the day, still a circus. Of cats."

"I think we've taken this metaphor too far," Bruce said, laughing a little.

"Let's never speak of it again," Tony replied, feeling his muscles uncoil as some of the encounter's tension left him with his laugh. "Hey, I wanted to ask you something," he said. Bruce glanced over at him, which he took as a go ahead. "If you had to make the call on Loki, would you just let him be or confront him?"

"About," Bruce said, waiting for Tony to fill in the gaps. He had never been entirely forthcoming with everything that had transpired between himself and Loki the last time the god had visited Avengers Tower. The team had more tact than to ask, of course. They assumed the worst, especially Clint, and they weren't about to make Tony relive what they assumed were memories of torture.

"This whole situation," Tony said, crossing his arms. The elevator stopped, opening its doors to the lab. Neither man made a move to exit. "Maybe I should just call him out on it and confront him. But honestly, right now, I'm not sure how to deal with him and I'm pissed."

Bruce nodded, staring past Tony and out into the lab. He knew it was hard on his friend to be this forthcoming about anything he was feeling, let alone the current situation. So he considered Tony's question carefully, appreciative of what it had taken Tony to ask.

"I---I don't know that I would confront him outright," Bruce said, shifting uncomfortably. "With a guy like that, he might just snap, Tony."

Tony shrugged. Bruce was right, of course.

"But I don't think I would avoid him completely, either. That sends the wrong message. It's like you're just letting him take over then," Bruce took off his glasses, wiping them on his shirt. How could he predict chaos? "I mean, you don't have to talk to him, but you don't have to avoid him either."

Tony stepped out of the elevator, making sure that Bruce was following him. He set his plate down on a table and slowly turned his attention back over to Bruce.

"It's not like he's going to be here forever," Bruce continued, making himself comfortable at the table. Tony made a face that suggested he did not agree. "I do think this whole thing is still about Thor," Bruce said. "And like I said, Loki will probably make a scene or get bored in a week. I don't think he wants to stick around here."

"Loki's not above taking his time," Tony said, his spine tingling ever so slightly.

"Maybe," Bruce said. "Look. I know this whole thing has you on edge, it has everybody on edge. But Thor is more hopeful than I've ever seen him and how long could this last? You just have to

stick it out a little bit longer."

Tony rested his chin on his fist, his elbows propped up against the table. Tony had his whole life to deal with Loki, because that's how long Loki had to deal with him. It wasn't just in the tower's common rooms that he was avoiding Loki, and sooner or later, he knew he'd have to do something. But he had to plan it out. He had to have some sort of strategy. A suit was worthless in a match with the god because it was mind games that they were playing, and Tony would be damned if he didn't win.

He was exhausted. What had happened to the lost being that had called on him? Which side of the god was he playing with now? Did Tony know what he was doing?

"It'll be fine," Bruce reassured him.

Tony shrugged a small smile. "Yeah," he said without commitment.

Chapter End Notes

I'm curious, what kinds of antics would you enjoy seeing with Loki and the team? I'm not completely sure on how dark I'd like to go yet, there are several turns I'm considering.

And as always, thank you for reading!

What I Thought That I Knew

"Tony," Bruce had said. *"It'll be fine. You shouldn't be the one living like a prisoner in your own home."*

Tony sat back, considering his friend's advice again. Maybe he was right. No, he was definitely right. Tony had to stop avoiding his unexpected house guest. Ready or not, if he let it go on, Tony knew it would blow up. Bruce had said that he didn't need to even talk to Loki, he just had to let the god know that he wasn't afraid.

But damn, was Tony aggravated. He couldn't get over feeling completely blindsided. And this complicated things. Well, complicated them yet *again*.

Before, Loki had been a dream, tangible only in the moments that he was present. Now, he was everywhere in Tony's waking life. The god wasn't an escape anymore, he was something to be escaped from. Tony ran a hand through his hair, letting out a heavy sigh. Would he have felt differently about this if Loki had been anyone other than, well, Loki? Tony thought that he had made it very clear to the god that he had gutted Tony's life the last time he'd visited Avengers Tower. And there were problems because of that.

Tony hadn't lied, though. He meant it when he told Loki that he was still there. Now that the initial shock had worn off, there was a thrill that ran through Tony. He felt a rush at the thought of scenarios that could play out between him and the immortal. Wonderful, secret scenarios that would be between himself and Loki only.

It hadn't escaped Tony's notice that there was a bit of power in his hands now. With Loki's living arrangement, he was always in reach, in someway. Even now, he was just floors beneath Tony, instead of galaxies and realms and infinite stretches of starstuff. Before, if Tony wanted to see Loki, he had to hope that the capricious god felt the same. Now, Tony just had to turn on a monitor.

It was a gross invasion of privacy, perhaps, but had he not caught the god snooping before?

The fond memory rubbed its claws into his chest. Where was *that* Loki?

Still in there somewhere, Tony thought, sitting up. He glanced around his bedroom, trying to push that thought back down.

He was still angry, that was true, but now that Tony had processed it a little further, and now that he had Bruce's advice, well, maybe he should take a walk around Avenger's tower.

Hell, he just wanted another shot at seeing Loki's new leather trousers.

It was four thirty in the morning, but whatever. It was his tower.

Tony stood up. He was wearing pajama bottoms with narrow black and gray stripes with an old cotton t-shirt. He had tried sleeping, really. It just hadn't worked out with his thoughts keeping him captive. For a moment he considered a change in appearance, and then thought, fuck it. He'd wear whatever he damn well pleased and still be fucking gorgeous if the bastard saw him, thank you very much.

With that thought still in mind he opened his bedroom door and headed down the hall with some pride in his step.

When the elevator came he stepped in, already feeling more like his usual self. Bruce was right. Tony considered the buttons. Instantly his eyes fell to floor thirteen. He pretended that they hadn't and looked for the floor with the common room kitchen. That seemed like the right place to start. His heart raced a little. Was it a pleasurable thrill or anxiety? He didn't know when he hit the button.

Each floor slipped past, closer and closer. He imagined Loki's hair fanned out around the god's face, a bead of sweat rolling down his sharp cheeks.

Tony smirked and then bit it back. Maybe after he'd figured out Loki's plans. Loki was still Loki, and if he was a threat to the team, well, Tony was still Iron Man and that bridge would have to be crossed.

A pleasant chime signaled the elevator's arrival. The floor was pitch black, although Jarvis was happy to accommodate for that with Tony's command. He walked out into the empty kitchen, vaguely disappointed. Well, he still had a few more common areas that he could check. Tony thought back to the day before, to Bruce standing between them, to Loki's face as the doors closed.

Okay. He was definitely more than a little disappointed.

So Tony headed back to the elevator to look elsewhere, rationally knowing that Loki would be sleeping at this hour.

This time he took it to the living room, where he found that all of the couches and chairs were empty. Letting out a sigh, Tony turned back around. Systematically he checked each room that was a common area, including the ones he wasn't certain of. (Did the balcony count as a common area? What about the closet in the lobby?) By five 'o clock Tony had to admit that success was beyond him.

He debated going down into the lab to work, but he knew that nothing he'd do at this hour would be productive. So he settled for returning to the living room, and checking the couches there one last time before going back to his own floor.

They were empty, of course.

Tony wasn't sure whether he should be relieved or unhappy. This was stupid and he was tired. He slid down onto the couch and flipped on the TV. The morning news had begun. He watched, detached for a while, as anchors passed pleasantries back and forth and repeated the traffic reports again and again. Slowly, he nodded off to sleep.

Jarvis, in a genius stroke of programming (Tony's), shut off the lights. In the darkened room Tony fell into a heavy sleep, his snore rattling loudly over the TV murmur. It had been weeks since he had slept so deeply. Illuminated only by the flashing of the TV and the steady blue of the arc reactor, the room seemed vast in the darkness. It was a comfortable space for the visitor to slip into, unnoticed.

He didn't need to take the elevator to move around, of course. He only took it out of the hope that he would encounter a certain someone. Sighing, he sat down on the floor, resting his back against the couch. Well, the incessant snoring was a mood killer. With a simple snap of his fingers it ceased, the sleeper none the wiser. Loki turned his head to study Tony's features in the dimness, contemplating. He reached his hand up to the mortal's face and ran his thumb along the stubble there. Tony's face twitched, but he did not awake. Loki sighed again, uncertain.

Tony was difficult to account for completely, considering how impulsive the man could be. If he

pushed Tony the wrong way, it might be grounds for his dismissal. Then again, Loki thought, he might find Tony's reckless eyes staring back at him full of promise. Twisting around, Loki brought his face up close to Tony's, enjoying the time that it took to reach his lips up against the man's ear and whisper, "Awaken."

Tony shifted minutely, still within the reaches of a deep sleep. Unperturbed, Loki tried again. "Wake, my man of iron, and see your god," he said, voice unyielding, rife with command.

Tony's eyes opened slowly, his mind hazy with sleep. At first he saw nothing but the dark room and began drifting off to sleep again. "Come to me," a voice purred into his ear.

Nope, definitely real.

Tony's eyes shot open and he turned onto his side, his ear brushing against receding lips. It took him a moment to focus in the blinking light, to make sense of the agile figure before him. His heart rammed into his chest, pounding so loud that he swore that he could feel it rupturing his eardrums. He froze on the couch, uncertain now that the moment was there.

"Did you miss me?" Loki asked, comfortably resting his arm against the couch cushion in front of Tony.

"Yeah," Tony said bluntly. "Care to explain what your plan is, or are you just---"

Loki's mouth twisted up in a pleasant smile, but just to one side. His eye lids relaxed and slipped down halfway as he reached out his hand, tracing his pointer finger down Tony's lips and over his chin before pulling it away. "I want to hear about how you missed me."

Really? That's what they were doing right now? Tony shoved back an eye roll and took a long breath, trying instead to read Loki. "*With a guy like that, he might just snap*," Tony remembered Bruce saying.

All of the anger that Tony thought was going to come raging out of him was gone now that the moment was here. Instead he was curious, and intrigued, and maybe somewhere, a little bit scared.

"I missed my t-shirts, for starters," Tony said.

Right answer. Loki grinned, a low, mirthful murmur of agreement echoing from his chest. "And?"

Tony rolled off his side, his chest facing up on the couch. "That stupid strut of yours."

Loki reached across him and slipped his hand under Tony's head, tilting him back towards Loki's face. "And?"

"And what are you doing with that floor of yours?" Tony said, suddenly curious. Loki didn't know that he'd seen the redecoration, and he also didn't know just how much thought Tony had put into why Loki had done it.

The god grinned beguilingly and looked away. "You may see it if you wish."

Tony's heart faltered for a moment. Now that the invitation was on the table, he wasn't sure what he wanted.

"I can take you there now," Loki said softly, running his fingers down under Tony's chin, tracing them right at the edge of the man's shirt collar.

"How did you find me?" Tony said, reaching for time.

Loki moved closer, leaning down against Tony's ear again. "I always know where you are," he said, a faint growl smoking across his words.

"That hardly seems fair," Tony said.

"I grow tired of this," Loki said, a flat note of misery ringing through his tone.

"I know," Tony said. When Loki crawled up onto the couch, laying down ontop of him, he didn't stop Loki. He just lifted one arm up around the god's back, gently massaging the being's shoulder blades. He enjoyed the soft purr that elicited. For a while he laid there, content with just that, though he could sense Loki's impatience. "I just wish you would tell me what's going on," he said.

Loki was silent. He let Tony continue rubbing his back, but he made no response. Was he thinking or just refusing to give an answer? Tony wasn't sure. "Hey listen," he said, intent upon asking. His words were met with empty air. He squinted as the elevator doors opened, their light flooding the room. Tony lifted up his hand, trying to make out the silhouette.

"Oh hey," Steve said. "I wasn't expecting to see you down here."

"Yeah," Tony said, struggling not to sound irritated, "I fell asleep watching TV."

"Oh, sorry," Steve said, walking in and tripping the lights. Tony really struggled not to snap at him. "I realized I left my ipod in here. I like to take it with me for my morning run, it's really nifty."

"Yeah," Tony said, mentally kicking himself for giving Steve the damn thing.

"Well, sorry to wake you up," Steve said, picking up the electronic from the coffee table and heading back to the elevator with a slight jog. "Hey, you don't want to come with me for a run, do you?"

"No," Tony said. Yep, he definitely sounded irritated now.

"Alright, well, see you later," Steve said, closing the doors.

Tony watched the elevator long after the man had left, none the wiser. "Jarvis," he snapped. "Turn off the damn lights."

"Certainly sir," the AI chirped.

Tony laid there waiting for a long time, but he remained alone. He replayed the encounter over again and again, picking at it for nuances. Then he realized that he was still upset and just simply felt exhausted. A few hours later Steve found him, asleep again. When Tony awoke, around two that afternoon, he found a cold cup of coffee beside him and a guilty feeling that the captain had been there.

What I Thought That I Had Left

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

His lungs searing, crying for air, he pushed on. With each footfall he felt more like himself. Running always put him in a better state of mind, and he was never one to turn down a physical challenge.

The Midgardian gym was restrictive, and he much preferred the landscapes of Asgard, but it was enough. Lost in running, Thor didn't notice that he was not alone. It was a long time before he noticed the figure crouched in the corner.

For a moment he was reminded of someone much younger, waiting for his turn.

In a slow jog he made his way over to the corner, stopping before Loki. The younger god looked up at him, alert. A faint whisper of resignation crossed Thor's features before he sat down next to Loki, who curled away a little, evidently from the smell. He had always been like that, and it had always frustrated Thor.

"What brings you here today, brother?" He asked, level and steady.

"It is at the counsel of another," Loki answered quietly.

"I see," said Thor.

"It seems your Captain America thinks that speech is the most forthright manner of resolution."

Thor looked over, watching Loki closely. His little brother did not look at him when he said it, or make any movement now. His dark eyes were elsewhere, in that isolation that had enveloped him so thoroughly in his older years. "Does that mean you seek to make amends?" Thor asked, a decibel louder than Loki would've preferred.

"Not for Asgard," Loki said quickly, from the lower range of his voice. "Just...between us."

Thor caught his breath. He had none of the craftiness of his adopted kin, and little of the suspicion of a twisted mind. Thor simply wanted to know and ask. "I, that is," he said, afraid of botching the attempt, incredulous that it was happening, "I would like that."

Loki did not meet his brother's gaze, or say anything. But he was sitting there, and that was certainly a victory for Thor. "When we thought you dead," Thor said, patching in the silence, "Sif and the warriors three told me that you said you loved me greater than any of them," he said. Thor shifted uncomfortably, trying to best articulate to Loki what that had meant to him. "It was, you said---"

"That was certainly true," Loki said, though it was as if the words had been pushed out of him.

"Then why did you do it?" Thor said, not a moment after. "Why did you leave, why did you attack Midgard? Why did you abandon all of us?"

"It had nothing to do with---" Loki stopped, pulling in each one of the scattering thoughts in him on hooks. "Thor, my time in Asgard is finished. And what has transpired here on Midgard in the past is---"

"Do you still mean to rule them? Do you mean to take this as your home?"

Loki opened his mouth and closed it again. Thor could not remember a time when he had seen his brother at a loss for words.

He pushed his black hair back over his shoulder, the curled ends brushing against his finger tips. "You changed when you came here, Thor. Did it not occur to you that perhaps I have as well?"

A smile broadened across the blond god's face. "These Midgardians have a charm, do they not?" He laughed.

Loki gulped, discreetly, he hoped. Yeah, a charm. If that's what you wanted to call it. What would Tony call it?

As Loki was running through his small vocabulary of Midgardian slang to make a guess at Tony, Thor grabbed his shoulder, knocking Loki out of his thoughts.

He pulled his shoulder back forcefully, and Thor let his arm drop.

"Time on this planet will do you well," Thor said, pleasantly smiling. "There is so much you have yet to see."

"Here is fine enough for now," Loki said quickly, cutting off the buds of any invitations that Thor might have made.

"Yes, well," Thor said, the rush of excitement in his tone annoying Loki mercilessly, "you are welcome to stay here."

"That pleases me," Loki said, rising slowly. Thor was up in an instant.

"Perhaps we can partake in a festivity," Thor said. "The Midgardian way of celebration is---"

"This is sufficient," Loki said coldly, beginning to walk towards the exit. Thor followed him.

"Right," he said. "Loki?"

"Yes," he said, turning around begrudgingly.

"I am glad."

A trained smile crossed Loki's face, but it did not curl up around his eyes or illuminate his face. What he was trying to say, Thor never knew. Loki stared into him for a stretching moment, contemplative, then vanished up into one of the floors above. Looking into the space where Loki had been, Thor felt the crushing remembrance of how much he missed his brother all at once.

"Wow," Steve said, gently frowning. "That is not what I expected."

"That is the truth," Thor said animatedly, recounting his encounter with Loki. Steve sat up straight on the couch, glancing over at the TV to check that it was still muted. He was never sure. "You have the gratitude of my land," Thor said, clapping Steve on the shoulder.

"It was just a suggestion," Steve said. "I didn't know that he would take it."

"It is a great joy to me," Thor said. "Let us go out and celebrate."

"Oh no," Steve said quickly. "I am not sober driving again."

"Perhaps the man of iron then," Thor said.

Steve let out a laugh. "Tony? Did you forget the guy drinks a bottle a day?" It was then that Steve remembered another part of his conversation with Loki. It sobered him. "No, Tony's not an option."

"Bruce then?"

"Is Loki coming?" Steve asked.

Thor smiled uncomfortably. "No," he said quietly. "He does not wish to celebrate."

"Oh," Steve said, "Well, it's okay. We'll figure something out."

Thor brightened again. "Perhaps Ms. Potts would drive?"

"She's still out at a conference in Seattle," Steve said. "I'm sure Bruce will agree to drive."

"Let us assemble then," Thor said.

"Jarvis?" Steve asked.

"Yes, sir?"

Steve was always a tiny bit surprised that it worked. "Could you tell the members of our team that we're going out to celebrate tonight?"

"Certainly, sir."

Thor and Steve returned to their conversation, which was mostly once sided from Thor. Jarvis interrupted. "Ms. Romanov and Mr. Stark would both like to know the occasion, sir."

"Tell them my brother has made amends!" Thor said.

Another moment passed by. "All are affirmative, except for Tony, sir. He sends his apologies."

Immediately Steve felt a wave of anger. It was just like Tony to do something selfish, to let Thor down, he thought. Had they not let Loki stay at the tower for this exact reason? To help Thor and Loki fix things? Steve glanced over at Thor on the couch. If the god was disappointed, it didn't show. No, the god wouldn't show something like that, Steve decided. He would probably keep it to himself.

"I need to do a few things before we go out to celebrate," Steve said. He turned the TV sound back on and handed the remote to Thor. "I'll see you in a bit."

"Yes," Thor said, watching him leave.

Steve hit the elevator button to the lab particularly hard. With each floor he tried to reel himself in, to not just explode at Tony. There wasn't enough time, though. When the doors opened and Steve made out that familiar scruffy head of brown hair he made a bee line for it.

"What's so important that you can't come out and celebrate this?" Steve said.

"Hello to you too," Tony said, looking up from a pile of machine parts. His hands were slicked with oil and a small number of tools were scattered about him. He turned his attention back to them.

"What's your reason?" Steve demanded in his best Captain America voice.

"Some of us," Tony said, with a dismissive tempo not unlike that of their new tower resident, "can't just drop what we're doing at a moment's notice."

Steve gestured to the mess around them. "So this is more important to you than supporting a member of the team? This pile of bolts?"

God, he was reminding Tony of Pepper right now. "This is not just a pile of bolts, it's a very complicated machine, which someone of your delicate age can't understand."

"Haha, amazing, Tony. I've never heard someone take a crack at my age before." Steve crossed his arms. "Give me a good reason for why you're not going tonight. And before you do, let me remind you that we have been watching Thor agonize over his brother for the past week."

Tony gave Steve his full attention. "You really think that a millennia of bickering got solved in an afternoon? Tell me, what exactly happened with Thor and Loki? Did they talk it out or some other crap?"

Steve turned the most minute shade of red as his anger rose. "As a matter of fact, they did talk about it. Because that's what people do, Tony. They talk about their problems."

"Bullshit," Tony said, turning back to the machine.

"You wanna know what happened? Since you're not going to come out and hear the story yourself?" Steve said. "Loki said he wanted to make amends between himself and Thor. Not Asgard. Just him and Thor. So maybe he is a liar, Tony, and maybe he has done a lot of terrible things, but people can change, Tony. Why do you have to be so cynical? You haven't been around him once since he got here. Everyone else has at least tried to talk to him, even Clint. So quit acting like you know him."

That did it. That really did it. "First of all," Tony said, his voice raising into a shout, "don't tell me what I do and don't know. Second, just because Loki talks to you doesn't mean he's your best friend."

Steve stared back at Tony with just as much resolution.

"Loki's not even going to be at the celebration," Steve said. "It's just Thor. I don't see any reason why you can't come along."

Tony ignored him.

"Fine," Steve said, turning to leave. "Typical," he muttered.

"Yeah," Tony said back to him. "Typical Steve thinking that he knows what's best for everyone."

Steve rolled his eyes and opened the elevator door with disgust. Tony ignored the sound of him leaving.

"Jarvis," he said. "Alert me when the Avengers are out."

"Certainly," Jarvis replied. Tony went back to working, a slew of insults that he could've used on Steve coming to mind.

It wasn't until seven thirty that Jarvis told Tony the team had left. First Tony confirmed that yes, everyone was gone from the tower. Then he left his lab and went up to his room where he took a fast shower. He smelled good, he thought, towel drying his hair. Really fucking good.

He pulled out a cotton band t-shirt and some jeans, on the tighter side. Then he confirmed with Jarvis again that yes, everyone had gone out for the night. He made Jarvis promise to alert him if any of them returned. "Jarvis," Tony said, "Where is Loki?"

"He is in his room, sir." Tony considered that. He really, really wanted to go into that room. But he didn't know where he stood with the god right then. He had been invited there, true, but that had been last night. Did the offer still stand? No, it was best to meet on neutral territory for now.

"Tell him that I'll be in the kitchen." At least that way he'd have a drink if the god didn't show up. Hell, he'd have one if he did.

For a while Tony waited. He eyeballed the cabinet with the vodka in it, but put it off for now. He didn't want his breath to smell like alcohol when Loki saw him.

When the elevator doors chimed open, Tony saw no one. For a moment. Then, with relief, he saw the tall god standing there.

"Tony," he said quietly, walking slowly towards the man. It was not quite the reaction that Tony had been expecting.

"Hey," Tony said, with his best devilish grin. He leaned back against the kitchen counter. Loki stopped a respectable distance in front of him.

"You called," Loki said. In his disappointment it took Tony a moment to register why Loki wasn't reacting the way Tony had anticipated. He was sad.

Tony stepped forward and wrapped an arm around Loki's waist, pulling Loki forward with him, until he backed up against the counter again. Loki didn't stop him, but he didn't respond much either. "Long day," Tony said.

"Yes," Loki replied. He let Tony run his hand along his cheek, tipping his chin down to Tony's height.

"What's going on?" Tony had seen many sides to Loki, but he had never seen unhappiness. Not unless it was closely accompanied by something else, like rage.

"I have made many sacrifices," Loki said, leaning forward to breathe in Tony's scent. He closed his eyes. "The burden of them is---" Tony ran his hands down along Loki's back, bringing him in closer. "Consuming," he said simply.

Loki looked down at Tony, at his pupils blown wide and lustful. How he wished he had found this Tony earlier in the week. The lines of concern on the man's face did not escape the god's notice, but he felt none of the usual thrill he had for Tony's reactions. Things weighed too heavily upon him.

Tony gently wrapped a hand around the god's head, bending him forward so that Tony could whisper in his ear. "I can make things better," Tony purred.

Loki ran a hand through Tony's hair, appreciating it. Quietly he wrapped his arms back around the mortal's back, pulling Tony into him. Tony gasped, but Loki just held him there, breathing in softly against his shoulder. What he wanted from the man his pride couldn't give. Not tonight. Trying, he

pressed his lips to the man's throat, but it didn't feel right. He was just too heavy. "I will come for you," he said softly into the man's ear. "But not tonight." He stood up, backing away from Tony.

"Loki," Tony said.

The god turned back, his full attention on the man. "What do you want me to do?" Tony asked.

"Wait," Loki said simply. "I want you to wait."

Tony watched him turn back towards the elevator. He could wait a little longer, he thought. He already had.

Chapter End Notes

Something light hearted will come along soon. Somehow it just keeps turning out this way.

Now That I've Returned

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

He'd be helping himself to some vodka after all. Tony threw open the kitchen cabinet and took out a glass, pouring himself a drink and sliding into a kitchen chair. In the morning Steve found him slumped over on the table, and after checking for a pulse, he irritably woke the man up. Tony stirred, minutely, grumbling about something. "Get up," Steve said, pushing his arm. So Tony couldn't get smashed with the team, but he could do it solo, Steve thought. Tony sat up, and seeing that it was Steve, headed straight for the elevator. He stumbled on his way there, but he said nothing.

Steve returned to his morning routine, grateful not to have any more visitors.

"You should've seen him," Steve said to Natasha, later that afternoon.

"Yeah?" She asked, one eyebrow raising. Steve was irked, and it was the first time that he'd blown some steam off about it to anyone. "Any idea what's up with him?"

Steve turned his hands up, gesturing to the empty air. "Of course not."

Natasha shrugged. "He probably just needs his space. I'm sure we'll figure it out."

"Well, hopefully sooner than later."

"I don't know," Natasha said calmly. "Clint's not dealing with Loki's move in the best either."

Just then there was a crash at door. Thor's face peered out, and he stumbled in, coming to rest his head on the table. Natasha and Steve stared blankly at him for a moment before she said, "Do gods really get hung over?"

"We do not have your Everclear in my home," Thor said miserably. Steve shook his head and Natasha looked away, quietly amused. "It's too bright in this chamber," Thor moaned.

"Can't do anything about the sun," Steve said, getting up from the table and going over to the cabinet. "Is Clint still in bed?"

"Yeah," Natasha said, speaking over the sound of Steve filling a glass of water. "He's probably going to be in there all day."

"I'm just grateful that we don't have a meeting with Fury today," Steve said, shaking some pills out of an ibuprofen bottle. "I don't want to tell him about our permanent new resident with a hungover team." He set the glass and pills down on the table beside Thor's head. "Take these and drink this," he said authoritatively. Thor sat up very slowly, taking the captain's advice.

"You and me both," Natasha said, watching Thor down the glass of water and put his head right back on the table. "Speaking of," she said, "where is our new housemate?"

"I don't know," Steve said. "I haven't seen him in a while."

"Pardon me," Jarvis cut in. "But Ms. Potts is at the entrance and I can't make contact with Mr. Stark. Perhaps you could assist her?"

"I'll go," Natasha said, glancing over at Thor. Steve nodded.

"What's going on?" Pepper asked the moment that Natasha walked into the entrance. "Jarvis won't give me access to any of the floors without 'assisted clearance,'" she said, mocking the AI.

Picking up one of Pepper's bags Natasha answered, "I'm going to guess that Tony's being a little protective." She hoisted the suitcase over her shoulder and started walking towards the elevator, Pepper following. When the doors closed she pulled the stop button.

Pepper put down her bags and watched the black widow contemplate something. "I want to tell you first," she said, putting Pepper's suitcase down. "That while you were out in Seattle," she said, her sharp eyes trained in on Pepper's lucid blue ones, "Loki decided to move in."

She did not react with fear, as Natasha expected. It was with a mingle of intrigue and exasperation that Pepper asked, "As in, lives-here-now moved in?"

"Thirteenth floor," Natasha said.

"Well, that's certainly something," Pepper said, pushing a lock of hair behind her ear. "Did he say why?" It was her turn to study Natasha, curious about just how much the team knew.

Crossing her arms and leaning back against the elevator wall Natasha answered, "To fix things between himself and Thor. Naturally, not everyone was convinced but, yesterday, they did just that."

The two women considered that for a moment, with varying ranges of skepticism. "Anyway, now that that's done," Natasha said, "he's decided to stay here. Apparently, because Thor and he think that Loki will have the same Midgardian Attitude Rehab scenario that Thor did."

Pepper smiled, though her heart had started to beat a little faster. "I don't know if that's possible," she said.

"Neither do I," Natasha said. "But, in a way, it's an advantage. At least now we know where Loki is." She pursed her lips, her eyes narrowing, mind racing over this now familiar topic, across a multitude of different scenarios.

"Do we know anything else?" Pepper asked.

"That's all we've got," Natasha said. "For now."

"Thank you for telling me," Pepper said genuinely.

Natasha tipped her head to the side briefly in acknowledgement. "No problem. Jarvis told us you were here, I think Tony's probably passed out."

"Hangover?" Pepper asked, already knowing the answer. Natasha nodded. "Well, hangover or not, he's going to get up and fix Jarvis for me. I won't be escorted around my own building."

"I don't blame you," Natasha said, pulling the stop button again. "Do you want to start there first?"

Pepper grinned in her quiet, self-assured way. Natasha pressed the button for Tony's floor. "How's Clint dealing with this?" She asked as the elevator began to ascend.

"Oh, you know Clint," Natasha said quietly. "He's...Clint."

"There's a wine bar that just opened up a couple of blocks down from here," Pepper said. "Are you

free this evening?"

"How's eight," Natasha said as the elevator came to a halt.

"Sounds perfect," Pepper said, picking up one of her bags. "I'm sure I'll have a new Tony story or two to trade for your Clint ones after this," she said.

"I look forward to it," Natasha said, watching Pepper disappear behind the doors, fire in her step as she walked down the hall towards Tony's room. Natasha really couldn't wait for the evening to roll around. Alone, she smiled wide, amusement mixed with just the tiniest bit of pity for Tony. Still though, she was rooting for Pepper, not that Pepper would need it.

The door to Tony's room creaked in protest as Pepper slowly opened it, stepping quietly into the dark room. She made out Tony's outline on the bed and walked over, gently sitting on the edge of the bed. His soft breathing quietly accented the somber mood of his bedroom, the blue light from his chest casting long shadows across the wall.

Pepper reached out, running her hand along his arm. "Tony," she said gently. "Tony, wake up." His eyes fluttered briefly, and then sleep took him again. She pushed his arm a little harder. "Tony," she said.

"Grrraamphh," Tony mumbled, rolling over on his side, the light from his chest illuminating her.

"Tony, get up," Pepper said sharply.

He opened his eyes, hazily making out a curl of a strawberry blond ponytail in the light. "Pepper?" He said, rubbing at his eyes and propping himself up on one arm. "Pep," he said. "What time is it?"

"Three in the afternoon," Pepper said.

"Oh," Tony said, rolling over onto his back. As his mind crawled its way out of sleep the pleasant surprise of finding her there mingled with the worries of his waking life like a bitter aftertaste.

"Pepper, how did you get up here?"

"Natasha had to escort me," Pepper said.

Tony didn't have to look at her face to know what Pepper thought of that. "Listen, I didn't want you to get caught by yourself---"

"I know," Pepper said, curling her feet up behind her, easing in closer on the bed. "Natasha told me that Loki's here."

Tony turned his head, pain and uncertainty peeking their heads out from behind the corners of his sculpted features. He mentally traced the curved lines of her face, the steady gaze from those blue eyes. "Pep," he said, reaching out a hand to rest on her thigh. "I---" He didn't know what to say.

"Tony," she said, brushing a hand through his hair. "We both know what we said about it," she said softly. "If that's changed, then, it's time for a new conversation. But if it hasn't---" her voice cracked, the only evidence of the flood of sorrow behind the dam of her composure, "then whether Loki's here in the tower or off elsewhere, we carry on."

Silence budded between them, rife with insecurity and doubt.

"About Jarvis," Pepper said when it had gone on a little too long.

Tony sat up in the bed. "I don't want you going alone here anywhere," Tony said quickly. "Pepper, you don't know what Loki will do, what he's capable of, and I just, I couldn't live with myself if he did something to you. That would be on me."

She pushed her hair behind the curve of her ear, as if that could push away the thought of *why would you stay with him then, when you're afraid of him?* She knew it was far more complicated and... "I know," she said. "I actually," a cute little smile curled up on her lips, "think it's a tiny bit sweet of you. Patronizing, but sweet."

"What?"

"You, trying to protect me from Loki," Pepper said simply. She thought back to her earlier encounter with the god, of him standing in Tony's t-shirt, practically stumbling over himself to make an exit.

"It's not funny," Tony said. "Really, Pepper, it's not." He ran his hand across the side of her cheek, locking eyes with her. "I don't know what he's after, Pepper."

"Isn't it obvious?" Pepper asked.

"No," Tony said. "It's not. It's complicated. Loki's never that straightforward."

"Are you worried about him?"

"Yes," Tony said, tripping over the word. He *hated* to admit it. "I've never seen him like this Pepper."

Pepper sat back, running both hands over her face, fighting for composure. If there was one good thing that Loki had done, it was reassuring Pepper that she loved Tony. In the months after the Avengers had fallen apart, in the months that she had spent building them back up again, over and over and over again she'd come to the unequivocal answer that she loved Tony. And once that love had taken hold, once that fire began, there was no putting it out. Even if she left Tony, she knew that somewhere in heart she would still love him. Even through all of his stupid, selfdestructive bullshit she loved him. But she didn't know what was best for them. Or what was best for her. Together or apart? She did know, however, that Tony was falling apart from the inside out, just like her. And there he was, putting her safety first. She recognized that. He was putting her first, so maybe, somehow that meant something. Or maybe this was all a mistake. She sucked in a breath. Why did that whim-driven god have to appear and meddle with them?

Pepper would never know that the conflict blossoming in her and Tony like bacteria in a petri dish had been Loki's original, vengeance ridden goal. She would never know that it just hadn't ended the way that Loki had planned.

She slid her legs back over the side of the bed. "Just fix Jarvis so that I can walk around." There was no use rehashing everything she and Tony had said before. They both knew.

"Jarvis," Tony said as she stood up. "Grant Pepper full access to Avenger's Tower." He watched her walk slowly over to the door and pick a bag up. He opened his mouth to say something, but as guilt seeped through his chest like spilt ink, he knew there was no string of words that would ever be quite good enough. She disappeared behind the doorframe and his thoughts came rushing at him all at once, a blur of raven hair and soft colored eyes.

When Pepper reached the elevator she hit her floor without thinking. Then she stopped, her eyes lingering over the thirteenth floor. The doors opened, and just beyond them she saw that Natasha

had dropped off her other bags. In the quick flash of an impulse she tossed the bag in her hand over towards them and slammed her free hand, hard, on the thirteenth floor. In the time it took for the elevator to sink she composed herself, delicately brushing back the free strands of hair from her face.

Adrenaline whispered through her veins, its drumbeat growing louder with each consecutive floor.

Seventeen.

Sixteen.

Fifteen.

Fourteen.

A pleasant chime sounded. Thirteen.

The doors rolled away like waves, in dreamy slow motion. Pepper stepped out onto the intricate rug, uncertain whether she was in Stark Tower at all. First her eyes trailed along the ceiling, across the dazzling sweep of crystalline rods hanging there like enchanted icicles. She heard the soft crackle of a fire and the low, jazzy peal of unfamiliar music from some corner of the room. Her eyes swept across the expansive space, across the tops of the highbacked black furniture, like spectres rising out of the ground. It was haunting and beautiful, and so enthralling in its presentation that it was quite some time before Pepper's eyes met the cat-like ones curled up across the room. They had been watching her for a few minutes now.

Pepper squared her shoulders and walked straight to the chair that Loki was lying across, an idle book set page side down against his stomach. For a moment neither spoke.

"Ms. Potts," Loki said, not moving. "To what do I owe the pleasure of you visiting my room?"

"It's my tower," Pepper said instantly, regretting it not a moment later. She wasn't sure why she said that. "And I have not had an opportunity to welcome you since your abrupt move in," she recovered. The scent of Earl Grey hit her nose and she glanced over at the coffee table to see a pair of steaming teacups and a plate of tea biscuits.

"Please sit," Loki said, a rattling edge creeping in on the ends of his soft words.

She did.

Loki unhooked his legs from the arms of his chair and swung them back over, relaxing his arms out wide into the arms of his chair, just above his knees.

"I like what you've done with the place," Pepper said, picking up the tea cup and taking an unnecessarily long drink from it, just to flaunt that she had no suspicion of the drink presented.

"Thank you," Loki said dully, noting the challenge in her eyes.

Pepper set down the cup, the tink of china puncturing the room's musical backdrop. "Perhaps in your time here you could further my business," she offered. "That book you gave Tony was very beneficial."

"So you've said," Loki said, snatching up his teacup and running his finger along the brim. "I think," he said darkly, "That its use has ended." He dipped his finger into his tea, a motion that would have been crass on anyone but him. He ran the tea slicked finger along the bottom of his lip.

"Though I am pleased to be of use to you." He flicked his finger away from his lips, curling his eyes pensively upward, an unkind flare within them.

"Would you like to tell me why you've come," Pepper asked flatly.

"Ms. Potts," Loki said, turning his cheshire face upon her. "Contrary to what you might believe, I am not some wicked, simpering monster," he said coyly. "My only family resides here," he said matter of factly, "And I intend to improve upon that." He stared, unmoved, into her unimpressed expression. "Or would you like me to say otherwise?"

"Oh, I would like you to say many things," Pepper said, sparks of a well trained temper showering her words. "But instead I'll say something." She leaned forward, summoning the well rehearsed rhetoric of every CEO mannerism she had. "If you harm Tony, god or not, I will see you fall."

A heartbeat of silence passed and then Loki's howl of a laugh echoed through the room. "Oh," he said, eyes flaring. "I see why Tony likes you."

Pepper sat back in her chair, attempting to conceal just how unnerving she found that outburst. She pretended that Loki was just another businessman, just another deal to be made. "Right," she said. "Well, enjoy your stay here Mr. Laufeyson," she said, rising up out her chair.

"I look forward to seeing you again," Loki said, watching her limber frame stand, being nothing but a blur of black in her peripheral vision. She could not say the same of him.

With each step towards the elevators she timed herself, making sure it was not too fast, not too slow. When she stepped past the opening doors, relief washed over her. Face still, she turned back towards the open room as she hit her floor button. She saw that Loki was still watching her, a thin smile tugging mercilessly at the corner of his lips. "I really am," Loki said to her as the doors separated them.

Somehow, she was absolutely certain that it wasn't a lie.

Chapter End Notes

Because two bad ass ladies would be friends.

Save That Dance for Me

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

"What's this," Clint said, popping open the gold seal of an envelope with his thumb. He didn't look down at the card inside, just up at Bruce.

"It's a gala," Bruce answered.

"So what's the deal? Am I there for security because I am not doing the whole schmooze around the room all night thing," Clint said, pulling the card out and flicking it open dismissively. He scanned the invitation briefly, noting that the date was not far off. The place, Avengers Tower, was not to his liking. Not at all.

"Of course not," Bruce said, sitting down in the armchair across from Clint. "We're the main attraction."

"I was afraid you'd say that," Clint said, shoving the card back in. Bruce sighed and rubbed his temple. "What's the charity?"

"It's to benefit a medical research group that Stark Industries would like to align itself with," Bruce answered.

"Well, Tony can spend his night sucking up to people," Clint said. "I'm not doing it just so that he can say the Avengers are going to be there."

"It's not Tony that's pushing it," Bruce said. "It's Pepper." Clint shook his head.

"Couldn't she have organized it somewhere else at least? I doubt the guests are going to be thrilled to find out that Loki's just upstairs. How is she going to deal with that little detail anyway?"

Bruce shrugged. "That's a good question." Two weeks had passed since her return, and she had spent them feverishly planning the charity event.

Clint leaned back in his chair, contemplating. They had neglected to tell Fury about their new housemate, let alone the city of New York. "Do you think she sent him one of these things," Clint said, gesturing with the envelope, "except that it says don't show up?"

Bruce grinned. "No, probably not."

"Well it looks like I have two days to get a mission and get out this event," Clint said, stretching. "How about you? Any unexpected trips that you need to make?"

Bruce shook his head. "It's just one night. It won't be that bad."

"You say that now," Clint said. Bruce shook his head, suppressing a smile. He slipped his own invitation back into his jacket pocket.

Upstairs, Pepper pulled out a similar invitation and placed it just outside the doors of the elevator on floor thirteen. She saw Loki's languid form stretched out across his usual chair, but she did not deign to say hello. After the doors had closed he beckoned the envelope in his direction with the

curl of a finger. It floated across the room, coming swiftly to perch on the hand of the one that called it. He ripped the seal open and glanced at the card inside. It had the same printed invitation as the rest of the cards, but a line of narrow looped handwriting was written delicately below the details.

As you are aware, the ballroom downstairs is considered a common area. Should you wish to partake in the event, it may be pertinent to consider your reputation among New Yorkers. You may also note that any damage done to the gala will be grounds for residency dismissal. See you then. Pepper.

Loki let go of the card, pulling Pepper's handwriting away from the paper and spinning it in a spiral of magical ink on his finger tip. This had become so much more fun that he had even hoped for. He watched her words twirl around in the air before him, thoughtful. Did she think she would trick him into being kicked out, or was she taking a crack at reverse psychology? Regardless, it would be fun finding out.

A large truck pulled up outside of the tower, its backup signal beeping loudly as it navigated in closer to the doors. A delivery man swung the door open, jumping down from the rig. "Are you the one that needs to sign for this?" He asked Pepper, holding out a clipboard.

"Yes," she said, taking out a red pen from her pocket and gliding it swiftly across the line.

"Great," the man said, taking the board back. He unhinged the doors, revealing thousands of freshly cut flowers. "Where do you want them?"

"I'll show you where I'd like them arranged," Pepper said warmly, gesturing for the man to follow her.

"Greeeeat," Clint said, a few hours later. Dressed in a finely cut suit, he looked down at the flowers with disdain. "Just what my allergies needed."

"You'll be fine," Natasha replied, deliberately walking in front of him so that he could admire just how low the back of her dress went.

He was momentarily speechless. That dress may or may not have been a deciding factor in his inability to find a last minute mission. Her red curls simply floated above the V of alabaster skin, framed so flawlessly by a soft black that gently beckoned the light towards it. He imagined it slipping down past those hourglass hips, where, "Clint," she said, breaking into his thoughts. "Are you going to help move that or not?" He looked over at the trays she was pointing towards, failing to notice the smug, self-contented grin on her face. She knew damn well what he had been thinking.

"Gee Pep, I don't know if you had to go to all of this trouble for a medical research company," Tony said, fidgeting with one of his cufflinks. "A botanical society, maybe, but these guys just look up scopes all day."

"I think it's a good investment," Pepper said, surveying the room.

It was nothing short of beautiful. The chandeliers emitted a soft, golden light that lit up every surface. Soft, white fabric chairs lined the walls, elegant but inviting. At the center of the room a

large but shallow fountain was in place, adorned with floating water lilies. Intricate floral arrangements were woven throughout the room, natural and impressive all at once.

Tony shook his head, fidgeting with the cufflink again. Across the room he saw Clint deliberately maneuvering himself to get a better view of Natasha, who was pretending not to notice. He grinned.

"Well, the first guests are arriving," Pepper said, her attention on the doors. She walked out into the hall, a shimmering cream dress hugging her every curve like a Hollywood starlet. Her perfectly set curls disappeared with her. Tony wished she'd turn around again so he could see the front.

Instead he went towards Bruce, who was standing awkwardly off towards the corner.

"Hey," Bruce said, lighting up as his friend approached.

"Thanks for doing this," Tony said. Bruce shrugged.

"It's not so bad," he replied. Guests filed past them, the room filling with people. A lively chatter rose above the graceful melodies of classical music playing. A server stopped by with a tray of champagne that Bruce helped himself to. "Really," he said, taking a sip.

"Yeah, well, I'm sure the donations we'll get tonight be worth three times this," Tony said. For a while longer they talked, until the room became a sea of unfamiliar faces. There was a tap at a microphone.

The guests looked up to see Ms. Potts, smiling eloquently in front of a podium. "Good evening," she said. There were murmurs of hellos. "It's my pleasure to welcome you here tonight. Here at Stark Industries, we pride ourselves in finding innovative solutions to some of the world's most troubling problems---"

Just then Tony caught sight of someone new walking in. He wasn't sure what it was, but the moment he caught sight of the person, smoothly maneuvering their way through the room, sidestepping other guests, he just, he had to see the person closer.

Tony began pushing his way through the crowd of suits and cocktail dresses, pardoning himself for each shoulder he brushed and toe he stepped on. One man hushed him as he pushed past, evidently for causing a disturbance during the speech. Momentarily Tony lost sight of the person and settled for standing off in the corner of the room, just in time to hear Pepper invite the guests to enjoy themselves throughout the evening.

The music returned and the crowd fanned out again, guests breaking off into small, courteous groups throughout the room. Tony scanned the floor, intent on finding the stranger. He saw nothing. He looked down at his cufflinks again, fidgeting with them, wondering if he was losing his mind. "Hello Tony," a voice purred beside his ear.

It was new and known all at once, like a familiar sound coming through the filter of a thick wall or glass. He turned to his side, taking in the full silhouette of a very tall, slender man. His features were different but the same, like an image coming in through angled glass. And the suit---good lord, was that a great suit. Its Italian cut hit him in all the right ways, peeking in right at his waist, suggesting the hips below. Tony let his eyes take in the details of the suit far past any interval of politeness would allow. The subject of his gaze was openly bemused when at last Tony took in the features of his face, his articulate rich green eyes and glossy black hair. "Loki," Tony said with suggestive confidence.

"It's Lorne tonight," Loki said, stepping closer.

"How are you doing that," Tony said, grinning. "I know it's you, but it's also not you." Hearing Loki speak was quietly amusing, as if he were calling to Tony from across another space. It made Tony just a little bit giddy, like he was trying to catch up with the god, who was just out of reach. Even though he was only inches away.

"You want to acknowledge magic now?" Loki, Lorne said, tilting his head beguilingly.

"Applied science," Tony corrected him.

"Hmm," Loki said, stepping back. Tony stepped forward, closing the space between them again. "I do believe," Loki said, leaning in close, just so that Tony could smell his wintry mint breath, "that you have business to attend to here."

Tony's eyelids flickered for a moment as he came back to, shit, would he like to have that breath in his, "it can wait," Tony said.

"I told *you* to wait, did I not," Loki smirked.

"And if I don't?"

"Well," Loki said, leaning in close again, his scent pooling down into Tony's every pore, "then I suppose I'll have to teach you a lesson in patience." He stepped back again, deliberately trailing his gaze along Tony's well fitted attire. Loki stepped in close, closing the gap between Tony and himself, pressing them together, and for a brief, fleeting moment, rocked his hips down against the man. "You may save *that* dance for me," he purred.

"You'd better make it worth the wait," Tony said, a wicked grin tilting the corners of his lips.

Loki only raised his eyebrows, a thin smile vanishing as he disappeared back into the crowd.

Tony watched him go, watched the light from the room swoop down to illuminate the god's features in their golden hue. A few minutes later Tony lost himself in the carousel of clipped conversations and shallow introductions.

"May I?" Loki asked, extending his hand.

Pepper looked up at the meticulously dressed stranger. She placed her hand in his and allowed him to lead her out onto the dance floor. They settled into a graceful, polite waltz. "Thank you for attending," Pepper said to the man. Looking out over his shoulder at the room beyond, she thought that there was an even better turnout than she'd anticipated and smiled. She glanced back up at the man's face, and for a fleeting moment, thought he reminded her of someone. Then it was gone.

"Thank you for inviting me," he said, dipping her back. "You have such lovely handwriting," he whispered. In the crook of his arm her eyes widened. "Hush now," he cooed. "We don't want to make a scene at your wonderful evening."

"No, we don't," she said as he tilted her back up.

They spun, keeping time with the music. "I have to say, it was an intriguing thing for you to do," he said.

"Was it?" Pepper said.

"Oh yes," Loki said, raising his hand with hers.

She turned around, spinning in a glimmer of cream light, before returning as they were. "Like I said," she smiled, "I do hope that you'll enjoy your stay here."

"Oh I am," Loki replied. "Immensely."

"Are you," Pepper said. She glanced over and found the scruff of brown hair that she was looking for. "Pardon me," she said, pulling away from him. With a swing in her step she walked up to Tony.

"Shall we?" She asked.

None the wiser, Tony took her hand, settling into the dance with her. She kept him turning, running her hand along his shoulders. With one arm against his back she leaned in, her face appearing over his shoulder. She grinned, her eyes locking with the man she knew was Loki. He glared back at her, emerald flames pirouetting around vicious black holes. "You look nice tonight," Tony said.

"I do," Pepper said, smiling.

"What?" Tony asked, watching her eyes dart elsewhere.

"Nothing," she said. Her forehead rested against his shoulder, where she hid a very animated smile. This was madness, and yet, she was having so much fun doing it. Maybe Tony had rubbed off on her. When she glanced up the man was gone.

"May I?" A woman said. Pepper and Tony looked over at the stranger, at her extended hand. For a moment they both thought there was something familiar about her and then...no, couldn't be.

"Of course," Pepper said, stepping back from Tony. He looked over at her, a question in his eyes. Without waiting for a response the woman took his right hand, grabbing his left and putting it on the small of her back. Her dark green dress was cut remarkably like Pepper's.

At that moment Pepper saw Bruce standing along the wall. Quickly, she walked over to him, the click of her heels on the floor ringing out. "Would you?" She said, reaching out her hand.

"I'm not much of a dancer," Bruce said.

"That's okay," Pepper said. "Don't tell Tony, but neither is he," she said confidentially. She grabbed his hand and led him back out onto the floor, right alongside Tony and the curvy, raven haired woman.

Tony glanced over at Bruce dancing, at Pepper laughing. The woman leaned forward in the interval, her short stature forcing his hand to slide down onto her ass. She let out a loud sigh, her eyes pointed towards Pepper. Distracted, Pepper looked over. Tony flustered.

"I'm sorry," he said, trying to move into a respectable position, looking back towards Pepper.

"Eyes on me," the woman groaned in Loki's voice. Tony looked at her incredulously. His pulse racing, he looked at Loki, and then back over at Pepper. She'd heard it too.

Loki leaned down into Tony, pressing her cleavage up against him. Bruce was noticing too now, though only because the strange woman was being so forward. Loki batted her eyes seductively, laughing throatily as she saw Pepper turn red from the corner of her eye.

"May I?" Pepper said through gritted teeth, reaching her hand out towards the woman. Bruce looked at Tony, who looked at Loki and Pepper staring at one another. His body protested as Loki

pulled away from him, taking Pepper's hand.

Loki's heavily mascaraed eyes, just below Pepper's, gazed wildly into her cold blue ones. He took one hand in hers, putting his other into the small of her back. She leaned into him, and pulled back, their cream and green dresses twirling as they spun around.

"Um," Bruce said quietly. "What the hell is happening?"

"A dance," Tony said, grabbing his hand.

"Tony," Bruce said, a note of warning in his voice.

"Just follow my lead," Tony said, grabbing hold of him. He danced Bruce right up alongside the two women, fighting to make eye contact with either of them. Bruce stepped on his shoe.

"Sorry," Bruce said.

Tony waltzed him around past Loki and Pepper, his mind racing. Were...the two of them grinning? He had never been more scared or jealous or turned on in his life. "Tony," Bruce said.

"Oh, sorry," Tony said, loosening his grip.

Bruce looked helplessly from Tony over to Pepper and the strange woman. Right then, his only thought was escaping Tony's death grip, and seeing that whatever this was it was something between Tony and Pepper, he stepped back. "Please," he said, cutting between Pepper and Loki, taking the dark haired woman's hand. She glanced over at him, something feral flickering through her before she smiled sweetly.

In the next instant she had Bruce tipped backward, then back up, spinning over and around again. He stumbled over himself, finding that with each movement, somehow, she caught him and righted him, before sending him spinning again. Tony and Pepper joined hands, dancing close, their eyes trained in on Bruce and Loki.

The woman pulled Bruce in, her face within inches of his. She looked at Tony as she did, her plump lips pressing into a thin smile. "I'm well versed in science," she said loudly. "Maybe I can assist you with your...experiments."

"Science bros before---" Tony said, cutting in, pulling Bruce back from Loki.

"Don't you dare finish that," Pepper chided.

"Respectable women," Tony said. "Science bros stick together?" He said, glancing over at Pepper, his heart racing. She tilted her head as if to say that was okay.

Tony let go of Bruce, uncertain of where to stand now. He looked from Loki, to Pepper, to Bruce, his pulse pounding in his ears.

"Well," Bruce said, brushing himself off. "This has been thoroughly...weird." Tony knew the instant that Bruce stepped away that he'd have a lot of making up to do. Without waiting for a response Bruce left, vanishing into the crowd.

Tony, Pepper, and Loki stared at one another, each uncertain of making the first move.

It was Tony, with the most pressure on him, that broke first. "How the hell are you doing that?" He said, looking down at Loki's chest.

Pepper hit him with the back of her hand, not unkindly. Then she thought better of it.

Loki glanced around the room, and for an instant, Pepper and Tony lost awareness of his presence. In the next second he was there again, in masculine form, snootily fixing the top button of his suit.

"Ms. Potts," a man said, barging in on the trio completely unaware, "It's time for you to wrap this up," he said. Pepper looked over at her employee and back over at Loki and Tony. Then she turned to follow the man.

"Holy---" Tony said as she disappeared from view.

Loki looked down at him, just inches from his face, utterly intent on his prey. Pepper's voice rose over the loud speaker, pleasant and concise. Loki ran his hands up under Tony's dress collar possessively, massaging his thumbs against the man's neck. "What happened to patience," Tony said, his head spinning.

"We play by my rules," Loki said. "We always play by my rules," he whispered, his breath curling up into the soft shell of Tony's ear.

"Don't blow your cover," Tony said, dizzy from the dance and the intoxicating god just inches from him.

"Blow my co--," Loki repeated, "Oh," He said, glancing around them. He pulled at Tony's collar, letting go a split second before Tony fell into the pull. "No one's noticing."

Tony glanced over, across the room. "Trust me," he said. "This place is crawling with gossipy upper echelons. That dance is going to make the front page of---"

"Mmhhh," Loki said over him. He thought the room of mortals was nothing compared to a court of Aesir, but he didn't tell Tony so. Pepper's speech was ending. "I do suppose that things could be tricky," he muttered. "Fortunately," he said, "I'm very good at that." His eyes sparked with promise, and Tony felt his resolve fading. People were beginning to leave the room. "It's easy to get lost in a crowd," he said, taking Tony's hand.

"What are you doing?" Tony asked, feeling something hot and gauzy spread out around them, though he could see nothing.

"Making us invisible," Loki said simply, pulling him along.

Astonished, Tony stumbled behind Loki, noticing how remarkable it was that no one noticed them, no one glanced their way. He slammed into the arm of a woman, only to see her spin around and stare at the empty space behind her, confused. How he wished that he'd had this power as a teenager. It wasn't long before they reached the far side of the room and Loki pulled Tony up against the wall, wrapping his arms around the man.

"What are we doing?" Tony asked.

"You are waiting," Loki said.

Tony considered that, helping himself to another long breath of Loki's enchanting winter kissed scent. "And you are?"

"Waiting," Loki said, grinning.

"For?"

"For this," Loki said, watching the last guest leave the room. He waited for the staff to get comfortable cleaning up, for just enough time to pass before an electronic screech rattled the building.

Tony tensed. "That's the fire alarm."

"Is it?" Loki said, holding Tony tight to him. The mortal stared up at him, mischief in his eyes. Loki watched as the staff evacuated, drinking in the chaos and the noise, the running people, the one trapped in his arms so patiently. "Well," Loki said when the room was empty, "if there's a fire," he said loosening his grip on Tony, "we'd better put it out."

He pushed Tony back from him and in the same instant, looped his fingers up under Tony's collar, pulling the man's face up into him, pushing his tongue down into the man's mouth. Tony groaned and swore as Loki pulled back a second later, saliva suggestively dripping in the exit. Loki reached up around the back of Tony's neck invitingly, and then, forcefully, grabbed his collar, pulling Tony along behind him. Heart racing, head spinning, Tony tripped over himself trying to keep pace with Loki, whose stride outmatched him. Loki pulled him to the center of the room. For a moment the god looked at his perfect Tony, at his neat, firmly pressed suit, at his gorgeous, groomed hair. Then he pushed Tony into the fountain, watching in slow motion as the man fell into the water, the liquid rushing up and under his suit, turning the white dress shirt translucent. A water lily fell out onto the floor in the cascade of water that went over the edge of the fountain as the man's body went in.

Tony sat up gasping for air and felt the God over him a second later. Wet hands wrapped around his head, pulling Tony's mouth up into a hot, wet kiss, while strong legs straddled around him, pushing him down, holding him. Tony's arms shot up, tugging at the god's wet jacket, desperately tearing at it to bring it away, to get at the skin beneath. Loki let one arm slip at a time, allowing Tony to free the suit jacket without breaking his hold on the man. Tony moaned as the jacket hit the water and Loki pulled Tony's own jacket back, tearing it off at the seams, listening fervently as each thread cried in protest before snapping in half.

For a fleeting moment Tony remembered all of the power that Loki held back. He forgot in the next as an obscene, loud moan pushed its way down his throat from the one over him. Loki pushed him down into the shallow fountain, water rushing up over Tony's face and off again as Loki pulled him back up, his nails slicking under the wet shirt buttons and popping them off like candy.

Tony gasped loudly as Loki let go of his lips, fresh air satiating his deprived lungs. For a moment he looked at the god, at the long black hair dripping around his sharp face, at the wet dress shirt slicked against his skin. Tony pulled at the collar, fumbling with the buttons, forcing Loki to moan impatiently as each one came undone. He felt sharp teeth at his throat, trailing down as he brought the shirt free. The god's pale skin greeted him, and his hands ran appreciatively over Loki's gasping chest. It was all that they could hear, their short, hurried breaths, passing back and forth between them, barraging their ears. "Shit," Tony gasped, pushing up against Loki. He was so hard that it hurt and he didn't know how much longer he could last.

"Patience," Loki said again, his voice slurring. His hand slipped down into Tony's dress pants and it was all Tony could take. He pushed back, hard, catching Loki off balance and sending him down into the fountain.

"My turn," Tony said, undoing the god's pants in seconds, pulling wet, heavy clothing from him, pinning him down and pulling the wet socks off his legs, throwing their slicked forms over the fountain edge. He looked down at Loki's ravished, disheveled appearance, at the mercurial eyes watching him.

In the next instant Loki had him pinned down in the fountain again, and took pleasure in slowly freeing the man from his garments. When only one sock stood between him and total nudity Loki stopped, staring at the offending foot as though it were the most complicated thing in the world. "Fucking do it," Tony swore. Loki grinned, hooking one finger under the wet sock. He peeled it away slowly.

His eyelids lifted upwards, unveiling those green eyes, mirth seeping through him. How many times tonight had Tony tried reading those eyes? He didn't care, he just wanted the fire to sweep through and release him, now. He felt Loki's hand circle around him, felt sparks fly in his head, and was completely unaware of the lusty scream that came from him. He felt fingers enter and scissor him, quickly, pointedly, felt panic sweep through him and crushing desire at once, felt sound pushing out his throat in a shout as Loki slid into him, heard himself pleading, pleading, to just do it already, please, felt lips reassuring at his throat and neck, soft whimpers and then groaning shouts, felt a hand around his cock and the water rushing over them, sloshing around them, glistening down shoulder blades and muscles, felt that hand circling around his cock and pulling, teasingly, the rhythm inside and out of him, until he felt himself climbing, unable to take more, and spilled out into the fountain, a shameless cry of ecstasy pouring out of his lips. Loki's tongue slid back inside of him, slicking over his teeth, sucking that sound right out of him. He felt the god's arms around him, nails digging into the skin of his back, heard Loki's deep throated moan as he came, shuddering, moments later.

He pulled out, the water pooling around his red hips. Patches of pink and red had blossomed across his pale skin. He looked down at Tony, at the man's dishevelment, at just how thoroughly fucked he was and sighed, deep with satisfaction. Tony sat up in the fountain slowly, catching his breath.

The two men watched each other in quiet contentment.

"Maybe," Tony said, looking around at the wet clothes floating in the fountain and on the floor, "we should take care of this before the fire department shows up."

"Mhmm," Loki said, leaning over to steal another kiss from Tony. "They're not coming." He wrapped his hand around Tony's throat, running it down his wet chest, kissing him again. "We have time," he said.

"Good," Tony said, running his tongue up Loki's throat. "Because I'm tired of waiting."

Chapter End Notes

Because dancing is how adults handle their problems.

Finally, we get there, because I'm not evil. Well, not completely. Also, don't try at home?

The Things That I Could Tell You

His hands hovered over the keyboard, uncertain. He had tested every possible theory, of course, but there had to be something. There just simply had to be. Bruce tilted back in his computer chair and pushed one hard breath out of his lungs. This was needlessly frustrating, and he had every intention of giving the project up, but this morning he desperately needed something to do.

"*You say that now*," he recalled Clint saying when he had assured the archer that the gala would be fine. Clint had actually been right for once. It had been unbearably awkward, and if he never had to slow dance with Tony again in his life he would consider himself the most blessed man on earth.

Bruce would've told Clint he was right, if only Clint had seen it go down. He knew that his friend had been too busy tailing Natasha all night to notice anything else. In fact, he couldn't recall seeing them after the gala started.

Bruce turned his thoughts back on the machine before him. He sat up straight and massaged the back of his neck. "*I'm well versed in science*," he remembered the raven haired woman saying. She had unkind eyes and something indistinguishable about her. Bruce wasn't sure what it was exactly, but he did not like her, and he made a mental note to tell Tony as much the next time he saw the playboy. Not that Tony would listen, of course.

Whatever. Not his problem, right?

He sat in silence for a while longer, tapping at the keys occasionally, watching garbage appear on his screen. Deleting it. Then he heard the lab doors open.

Bruce looked up to see Loki walking towards him, nonchalantly glancing around the room. "Hello," Bruce said tentatively.

"Hello," Loki said with a whisper of a drawl. He made his way over to the man and sat down stiffly on a table a few feet away. Blueprints rustled as he sifted through them with boredom.

"Can I help you?" Bruce said pointedly.

Loki stopped riffling through the papers and turned his head towards the man. "I was rather hoping that I could help you," Loki said.

"Yeah?" Bruce scoffed, turning all of his attention on his computer screen.

He heard Loki suck in a sharp, impatient breath and waited for him to speak further. "You're having trouble with that machine, are you not?" The god said carefully.

Bruce considered it. Why would Loki want to help him with a device that, for all intents and purposes, imprisoned things? Come to think of it, how did he know what Bruce was working on, let alone that he was having difficulties?

"It's a simple matter of missing something," Loki offered when Bruce did not answer him. "Would you like me to show you?"

"Alright," Bruce said, one hand gripping tightly onto the computer chair. "What's the deal? Why are you interested?" Through glared eyes he surveyed Loki's posture, his demeanor. Perched on the desk, arms and legs both crossed, dark eyes lucid above a thinly lipped mouth. Then his features softened as he unfolded his arms, leaning back and using them to support himself.

"I appreciate your skepticism, Mr. Banner. It rather denotes your intellect," Loki said. He paused, considering how those words affected the man. His grip on the chair weakened. Very good. "But I see no harm in offering you the solution to your problem. Surely you can see that as well?"

"You want something in exchange," Bruce said.

Loki grinned. "Correct."

"Okay. What is it?"

Loki tilted his head to the side slightly in an attempt to make himself less intimidating. "I want information. About your culture, your world." He tensed, as though he had suddenly been hit by a cold draft of air. "I find it rather difficult to navigate your world at times."

Bruce's demeanor did not change.

"I think it's fair trade," Loki said. "The scientific advances of my realm for the culture of yours."

"Why don't you just ask Thor? Or Steve?" Bruce said.

Loki could not suppress the contempt that flared up through his level manner. "Thor is of my world, and not fully versed in yours. And Steve is of another generation, is he not?" They were both valid points, and Banner knew it. "You're the most reasonable person to approach."

"And if I help you? How are you going to use that information?"

Loki glanced over at the machine. "I'll learn it with or without assistance, but it would save me time to ask directly," he said simply. "As I said, I appreciate your skepticism, and I am aware of my past with you." He moved his hand in a simple twist, producing a high, metallic click within the machine. "I've completed your machine for you as a gesture of goodwill. If you'd like to make a deal, I'll tell you how I did it. You can take your time in thinking about your reply."

Bruce couldn't help it. He looked over at the machine, then at the readout on his computer. It would take time to test, but if it worked, what else was Loki capable of?

Loki stood from the table, his black garment drifting in behind him. "You know where to find me."

Bruce watched him leave. He did know where to find the god. Unfortunately.

If I Say That You Will

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

It took Bruce precisely two minutes to make his decision and then two days to test it. He didn't see it as a matter of trusting Loki. That was never a question, and never an option. Rather, he just had to decide how valuable the exchange was in comparison to its inherent risk. If Loki was feeding him scientific advancements, would a little cultural knowledge be too dangerous to give him? Could Bruce stay two steps ahead of him? Bruce knew that Loki was right. The Asgardian *would* learn what he wanted with or without Bruce's help. Yet if Bruce were the one teaching Loki, then he could filter some of what went through. And if Loki did try anything, well, Bruce wasn't above slamming him into the floor.

He had sat back in his chair that morning, staring at a screen that professed nothing but perfection. Loki had fixed the machine. Now that Bruce was certain of that, he had also worked out to a fair degree what the problem had been. Uncertainty still lingered in his mind, however. He wanted verification with the god, and he wanted more answers.

In the entire process he had neglected to tell Tony anything. The billionaire had been absent from the lab the past couple of days, and now that Bruce thought about it, he hadn't seen Tony at all. Not that it was unusual, though he had grown somewhat unaccustomed to it in the past few weeks. Tony had stuck to him like velcro when Loki first moved in. A sinking feeling dropped in Bruce's chest. Would Tony be upset with him for this? Was that worth the risk?

It took Bruce another hour to come to terms with that decision. He would tell Tony. Just not right away. He would also tell Thor and the others, though individually and confidentially.

That matter decided, Bruce found himself presently punching in the button for the thirteenth floor.

"It's nice to see you again," a detached voice said when the doors slid open. Bruce looked around the room, taken back. The room was...more unusual than he had expected. Actually, he wasn't sure what he had been anticipating, but whatever it was, it certainly was not this. Still, as he looked around the room, he could not find the voice. "Take a seat," it said simply.

For a moment Bruce doubted himself. Maybe he should just tell Loki that the decision was no. He felt his pulse quicken as he made his way towards one of the chairs. His eyes fell on the curiously vivacious potted plant on the coffee table.

"It's mistletoe," Loki said, appearing from behind the bedroom door frame.

"I've never seen it grown like that," Bruce said.

"It's a special variety," Loki said, taking the chair across from Bruce. He reached his hand down and pulled a leaf from the plant, dragging an arrow out from the space where a stem should have been.

Bruce frowned, uncertain. "Clint would love that," he said quietly.

"I'm sure he would," Loki said, pushing the arrow back down into the plant. It seeped down into the soil and returned to the plant matter that it had been. "You've considered your answer," Loki stated.

"Yes," Bruce said, leaning forward in his chair slightly. "I want to know how you did it. Was the flaw in the original formula in the---"

"Enough," Loki said, clipping the man's words. "First, you are going to give me what I want. Then I'll tell you."

Bruce sat back. "That was our bargain," Loki repeated.

"What do you want to know?" Bruce asked.

Loki leaned back as though he hadn't been seething with impatience a moment earlier. He pretended to consider his first question. "Tell me," he said. "What do you consider the most important trait in a person to be?"

Bruce wasn't sure how the god would act, but he said it anyway. "Compassion. Helping others."

"Like your gala the other night," Loki said.

"Well," Bruce said, "Sort of."

Loki stared down at him, waiting. "Mr. Banner, I need more concise answers than that if you're going to be of use to me."

And Bruce thought he found Loki annoying before this.

"Well," Bruce said, swallowing down his irritation, "yes, that gala went to charity, but it also made business connections for Stark Industries. So I don't know that I'd call it entirely altruistic."

"Better," Loki said.

"Thanks," Bruce said sarcastically. He saw amusement flicker in the god's eyes, but the being continued the conversation without remarking on Bruce's impudence.

"Is that how Stark Industries became successful then? By these," Loki flexed his wrist, pretending to search for the word, "compassionate gestures?"

"No," Bruce said, "the gala was also a way to meet and impress potential business partners."

"And Tony has spent a lot of time impressing these business partners for Stark Industries?"

"I don't know that he spent his time impressing *business* partners," Bruce said, stifling what might have been a good-natured laugh in other company. He saw Loki's eyebrows arch up minutely and the god suppress surprise. "Everyone knows that Tony was a playboy," Bruce said. "Even Tony calls himself one. I don't see a problem with telling you that."

"Playboy," Loki repeated.

Bruce shrugged. "Yeah."

"I mean for you to explain the word, mortal," Loki said, glaring at Bruce with contempt. The man grinned dismissively before answering.

"You know. Popular with the ladies. Gets around. Get the picture?"

"Yes," Loki answered quickly. "And this is how one excels in business in your culture?"

"Not particularly," Bruce said. "It's probably bit him in the ass more than once."

Not nearly enough, Loki thought. "Then what is the value of these compassionate gestures?" Loki said, not daring to ask more about Tony.

"You do them because it's the right thing to do. Not because you want something in return," Bruce said. He was beginning to feel more like the god's therapist than his coconspirator.

"Of course," Loki said.

Bruce wasn't sure how to interpret that. "Why'd you ask?"

Loki crossed one leg. "I want to know what values are important to Midgard."

"Because?"

"The questions are mine to ask," Loki said dismissively.

"Except for the scientific ones," Bruce corrected him.

Loki flexed his hands. "On your file you'll find that I've fixed the first part of the design. It is not complete," Loki said, resting back in his chair. "But it's more than sufficient for this exchange today."

"And just how many questions do you get?"

"As many as prove valuable," Loki said, eyes fixed on Bruce. "When our conversations are worth that machine you may ask a new question."

Bruce shook his head. Of course Loki wasn't going to give him the full answer. Not until it suited him. "Fine," Bruce said. "But I have a non-scientific question for you. Do you want to tell me why you're doing all of this? Why you've really moved in here?"

"No," Loki said.

Bruce stood to leave. "And when will we be meeting again?"

"I'll contact you," Loki said.

"Alright," Bruce said. He couldn't help but feel disappointed as he returned to the lab to look the file over. Though he wasn't entirely certain of what he thought he'd get out of it, he hadn't realized that he'd been expecting more. Well, there was still time, he reasoned. Besides, it wasn't like he wanted to spend anymore time with the deity than necessary.

Tony rolled over in bed, distantly aware of the mattress under him accomodating new weight. Halfway between being asleep and awake, he heard a whistle in the room and opened his eyes. In his waking haze he made out dark shadows on the walls, skewing across in ghostly tangles of faces and limbs. "Arrrgghhh!" Tony shouted, coming out of sleep completely, his mind a racket of panic and confusion.

He heard a deep throated laugh beside him on the bed and looked over to see Loki in the dim light. The arc reactor in his bare chest illuminated the trickster's smug face. The shadows slipped down from the walls and disappeared.

"Shit," Tony gasped, fear released. "What the fuck are you doing?"

"It was funny," Loki said, nonchalantly turning his head towards Tony.

"Yeah, fucking hilarious," Tony said, heart still pounding.

"Don't be mad," Loki said softly, swinging one leg over Tony and gently lying down against him, forcing the man back down against the bed. "Now tell me," Loki whispered, running his finger under Tony's chin. "Am I not a pleasant surprise?"

"Yeah, but do you have to scare me like that?" Tony said, eyes flashing. Loki ran a hand through his hair, and in spite of himself, Tony's eyes flickered closed for that brief moment. "Seriously," Tony said, trying to push out just how pleasant it was, actually.

Loki leaned down against his ear, and though Tony could feel his lips waiting, he didn't speak. That scared Tony. Loki always did that just before he snapped. Tony reached up around Loki's back, holding on tight to him, as though that could stop the god's ire.

"Am I not a pleasant surprise?" Loki repeated, and Tony could feel the words crawl down into his ear. "Or have I bored you?"

"No," Tony said softly, leaning right back against Loki's ear. "You have done many things, but you have never bored me." He felt the tension in the being above him uncoil. "Though you are frustrating me right now."

"Don't I always?" Loki said playfully, leaning up so that he could see Tony's face.

"Unfortunately," Tony said without humor.

He pressed his finger down against Tony's lips. "Shhh. I won't have your snark today."

"Oh?" Tony said, grinning. "What will you be having?"

"You," Loki said, dragging his pointer finger along the curve of Tony's jaw. "Every last bit of you."

"Good," Tony said calmly, grateful that whatever was bothering Loki had passed. He reached up to pull back the god's shirt.

"Ah," Loki chiding him. "Not until you've earned it," he purred.

There it was. Tony had let down his guard too early. "And how would I earn it?"

"Well," Loki said, running his fingers down the man's neck to rest on the arc reactor. He tapped it appreciatively. "You can start by telling me what you were doing today while you were missing me."

"Hmmm," Tony said, dragging the sound down seductively. "While I was missing you."

"You missed me terribly," Loki said, circling his hand around the arc reactor, brushing his finger tips just over the delicate skin around it.

"Terribly," Tony replied, pleased to find that Loki let him run his hands down into the sharp curves of the god's waist. "Let's see," he said. "I filed paperwork, I had a meeting with Fury," he looked up at Loki. "He doesn't know about you still, I approved prototypes, and I successfully managed to avoid Steve."

"You're not on good terms with him right now," Loki said.

"No," Tony said, pulling at Loki's shirt. The god hummed appreciatively. He let it slip over his head as Tony said, "Steve and I are having a little tension right now."

"I'm sorry to hear that," Loki lied, his hot tongue pressing into Tony's mouth as he kissed the next sentence away. When he let the man come up for air Tony tried again, intent on earning another piece of clothing.

"It was a boring day without you," he said, pushing back Loki's hair.

"Naturally," Loki said. "Any other conflicts?"

"Only one."

"Oh?"

"I've got this god that won't give me what I want."

"I can take care of that," Loki whispered.

Chapter End Notes

Easter egg: In Norse mythology Loki made a spear/arrow from Mistletoe in his plot to kill Baldr.

I'm not sure when the next chapter will be out, I'm debating what exactly I want next. If there are any character exchanges you've got your heart set on feel free to let me know. I enjoy hearing from you.

A Trip That We'll Take

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

"I really don't have an answer for you," Steve said that morning, looking over to Natasha for help. She shrugged back at him.

"Perhaps there is something that I can do," Thor said, still hopelessly grasping for straws.

"You know the guy a lot better than we do," Clint said.

That did not strike Thor well. "Yet he is beyond my reach," the god lamented. His initial joy over his brother's progress had slowly faded out over the past few weeks as it became more and more clear that Loki would not be spending time with him.

Bruce shifted uncomfortably in his chair. He hadn't told the team about his meeting with Loki yet, and now definitely was not the right time. That morning the entirety of their conversation had revolved around why Loki wasn't talking to Thor. Bruce hoped that the mischief maker would move on to other things soon. He didn't enjoy watching the brotherly soap opera fold out.

"What if we tried to arrange some sort of residents social," Steve suggested, ignoring the sounds of exasperation that created. "We could show a film."

"Yeah, I don't know about that," Clint said. Just then the doors opened and Tony walked in, dressed in an especially expensive looking suit. "What do you think?" Clint said, throwing the conversation over to him.

"About what," Tony said, pouring himself a cup of coffee.

"A social with Loki," Clint said, imitating Steve's inflection.

Tony tapped the spoon he'd been stirring creamer with against the side of his cup. "I think it's a terrible idea," he said. "Why do you ask?"

"Thor's trying to find a way to spend time with his brother," Steve said, a hint of preachiness in his voice, just enough to suggest to Tony that he was being insensitive.

Natasha cut in. "Where are you going?" She asked, more interested in Tony's sharp attire and his rare early hour appearance.

"I have some business negotiations to take care of in Europe," Tony said, taking a drink from his coffee. "So if you're planning a soiree with Loki, you're going to have to count me out."

"Why don't we just try it," Steve said, turning his attention away. Tony watched the five of them discuss ways to facilitate Thor and Loki talking for a while before putting his cup in the sink and leaving. He had a flight to catch.

Twenty minutes later the team had reluctantly agreed on a board game night. It was Natasha that put a call through to Loki's room to invite him. "He's not here, Ms. Romanov," Jarvis told her. When she asked, he had no information about where the Asgardian had gone.

35,000 feet in the air and thousands of miles away Tony wasn't even trying to disguise his

amusement as he showed Loki how to recline the jet seat. In his best Midgardian business attire the Asgardian was failing at acting like it was beneath him. Tony gave up and laughed. "Only push as far back as you wanna go when you press the lever," he said.

"--contraption," Loki muttered, a hundred and eighty degrees flat in the recliner. He stared up at the ceiling with disdain, hand still on the lever. Tony reached over and brushed his hand over the god's as he moved it aside. With a faint click Loki came flying back up in the chair until Tony let go.

Comfortably seated, he glanced over at Tony, who was gazing down at him with soft amusement. He smiled back.

"You're lucky," Tony said. "I never would've hired a personal assistant that couldn't recline a seat."

"I suppose it's fortunate then that I'm not your personal assistant," Loki said quietly.

"Ah-ah," Tony chided him. "This weekend, you are." Tony reached over and straightened the pin in Loki's tie. It wasn't quite Loki looking back at him, but Tony could see the one he knew clearly. Even in a disguise, there was something in his presence that Loki couldn't quite obscure.

Loki let that one slide. He was enjoying this. Since he'd moved into the tower, it had been him pursuing Tony on his terms. Now it was Tony's turn to pursue him.

When Tony had asked him to come along on this trip, disguised in plain sight of everyone, well, he was pleasantly thrilled. Not that he'd admit it, but nonetheless. He sighed and reached one hand over to run along Tony's hand, taking it in his own. "I suppose this is inappropriate behavior for a PA," he said quietly.

"I might let you off with a warning," Tony replied, squeezing back. The jet jolted up for a moment before righting itself again. "When we get to Berlin," he said, "We'll go straight into meetings. Then the weekend is free."

Loki nodded, circling his thumb around Tony's hand in his own. He closed his eyes, continuing the motion. "Feeling sick?" Tony asked.

"Vaguely," Loki replied, not opening his eyes.

"We'll be there soon," Tony reassured him, swallowing back the urge to ask him just how exactly gods got airsickness.

"Okay," Loki said, his voice soft and distant. He stayed that way for the remainder of the flight, hand in Tony's, with the man watching him, a tiny smile on his mouth until the captain announced that they'd be arriving soon.

Once his feet were back on the ground Loki was fine. Tony pushed him through the airport without problems, and it did not escape his notice that Loki was just the tiniest bit impressed with Tony's prowess. In the fifteen minutes between leaving the plane and getting into the cab, Tony charmed his way through security, flirted with baggage claim to jump line, and persuaded a cute group of girls into giving up their taxi for him. He guided Loki into the cab by placing his hand against the curve of his spine, gently pushing him forward. "West Refinery," Tony said to the driver.

Speeding down crowded city streets, Tony leaned back in his seat. A soft drumming sound came from his fingers as he tapped them against the briefcase in his lap. "Nervous?" Loki asked.

"Nah, this part's easy. I'm just excited about the rest of the weekend." The car jerked as the driver slammed on his brakes. He gestured towards the window. Tony glanced outside and then dropped

more money than was necessary for the fare. "Let's go," he said.

Tony grabbed their luggage, telescoping out the handles and putting the spare bags against the them. Then he put the handles for the two wheeled cases into Loki's hands. Loki looked at him and then back down at the luggage. "Be a good PA," Tony smiled.

"You will pay for this," Loki said, not without humor.

"No I won't," Tony said rightfully. The sound of wheeled luggage followed him into the building, where a secretary offered to keep it behind the desk. She took the handles out of Loki's hands, a faint blush coloring her face.

"You're expected," she said not a second later, her voice articulate and composed. "Third floor," she said, walking over the elevator and sliding a card to activate it. The doors opened. "Room 227," she said, gesturing for them to step in.

"Thanks," Tony said, walking past her. Loki watched her as the doors closed, and then looked back over at Tony, who was already checking his watch. When the doors opened again Tony walked out and down the hall without a moment of disorientation. He found the room swiftly and walked in, taking a seat at the front of the table. Loki hesitated, looking at the different boardroom chairs, considering where he was supposed to be. Barely noticeable, Tony kicked the chair beside him. Loki took that chair quickly.

A woman and a man sat across from them, both in fine business attire. They smiled, not unpleasantly, and the conversation was off. Tony flipped open his briefcase, pulled out a flashy tablet, and began tossing holographic models and charts across the room, speaking without doubt. Although Loki wasn't sure what Tony meant by shifting a paradigm or the revenues he was promising, it was abundantly clear that Tony was winning the negotiation. It wasn't even a negotiation. It was a slaughter. Loki gently folded a piece of paper over, feeling it bend beneath his finger. These business partners didn't even seem to be aware that Tony was setting all of the terms. He made all of his decisions look like their decisions. It didn't even take all that long. A few signatures later Tony's briefcase clicked closed and there was amiable laughter and he was leaving again.

Then they were in the lobby again and the blush faced secretary was putting the suitcase handles in his hands and a cab was already waiting outside. "I think that girl had a crush on you," Tony said when they were inside.

Loki looked over at him to see amusement. "Anyway," Tony said, "If you can handle it we have another flight to catch." Loki nodded and the car shifted into gear. In the same swiftness Tony had them through the airport gates and into another private jet.

Loki sat down in the chair, delicately reclining it this time. "Won't be long," Tony said beside him. Loki closed his eyes and was pleased to find his hand taken in another.

The plane touched down and they were out again, Tony impatiently leading the way. Loki made a mental note to be grateful for magic. He grabbed the bags again and followed Tony into a cab, this time one that drove on and on, past city streets and into the countryside. Tony said something to the driver, who smiled, and then opened the door for Loki on his way out. After a few seconds of trying to roll the wheels on the cobbled path Loki realized he'd have to give up and carry them. "Almost there," Tony said ahead of him.

Loki glanced around as he followed, observing that in the twilight this place was more rural than he'd first realized. He could see nothing but sweeping fields beyond the modest cluster of buildings

they were passing. For a while they walked along the cobblestone path until he could make out light before them, coming from a very large house. He heard Tony stop a few paces ahead of him and try a key in the door. "Come on," Tony said, heading inside.

Inside it was nothing short of beautiful. Sweeping wooden floors reflected the light of warmly glowing lights scattered around the well furnished room. Tony let him look around the room for a while before interrupting his thoughts. "There's a wine cellar downstairs," he said. "Wanna go pick out what we're having with dinner?"

Loki glanced over at him. Tony pointed towards the stairs, then walked away towards the kitchen. Curiously, Loki went over to the top of the cellar stairs. He glanced down into the cobbled cellar, and for a moment, felt a twinge of longing for the cobbled room he had brought Tony into so frequently. Steadily he descended into the room to find that the walls were lined with wine bottles. He let his disguise slip, falling back into his usual garb. Then he took his time selecting a wine, mulling over each of the labels, considering.

When at last he appeared at the top of the stairs he found that Tony was gone. For a split second he felt a panic, but then he saw the man outside on a patio.

"Hey," Tony said from a chair. Loki looked down to see two empty wine glasses and two plates with hot food. "I'd already ordered this in, though I probably could've cooked the turkey while you were down there. Have fun?" Tony was playing with him.

Loki just pressed his pointer nail down into the cork and pulled. It popped. Tony's eyes widened, but he said nothing. Then he grinned, that devil-may-care grin that Loki enjoyed so much. He filled their glasses and sat down.

"Not bad for a winery in Bordeaux," Tony said, taking a drink. Together they could see nothing but row after row of grape vines, fading into the horizon in the purple haze of twilight. Loki supposed he must be right. He'd have to ask Bruce about wine culture when they got back.

For a while they ate in comfortable silence, watching the last flickers of light fade from the sky. Stars came into focus as the day disappeared, a cool night breeze accompanying it. Loki felt Tony shiver beside him and reached over, putting his hand on the man's jacket. A heat pooled in it, warming the fabric. "That's a nice trick," Tony said appreciatively.

"Such a fragile human," Loki said. "What am I going to do with you?"

"You've made what you want to do with me very clear," Tony replied, that infatuating grin back on his face. He took another sip of wine and looked back out over the field. He looked incredible in his tailored suit, and that was probably why he'd left it on, Loki thought. It was working, though.

He poured another glass and continued to sit there peacefully. He could feel Loki watching him, waiting. It was Loki's turn to wait, Tony thought smugly. And Loki was very, very patient. He seemed content to watch Tony finish off the bottle and stare up into space, contented by his warm jacket and the glass in his hand.

"Loki," he said after a long time, "when you look at those stars, do you see the way to Asgard?"

Loki looked up at the sky, his contemplative features outlined by the hazy light coming from inside the house. "Yes," he said at last. "Though it's a very, very long way off."

"Must be strange," Tony said, "to actually travel all that distance. I saw it, another world in space, and it's still weird to think about all the stuff that's out there."

"There are better things here," Loki said, looking over at him. Tony's eyes were half open, like he were falling asleep.

"Like?" Tony said.

"I can think of one thing," Loki said, reaching over and running his hand down Tony's arm. The man was definitely sleepy.

"Aren't you going to tell me all the ways you like me now?" Tony said, laughing a little.

Loki rolled his eyes and sat back in his chair. "Because I like you," Tony said. Loki glanced over at him, one eyebrow raised up. "Really, I do," Tony said. The man looked back over to the house. "Why don't you go get another bottle," he said. Without answering him Loki got up and went inside. It didn't take him nearly as long to choose this time. He wanted to see that stupid grin that was on Tony's face and just be close to him.

Loki popped the cork out with his finger nail again, and this time Tony actually laughed. He let Loki pour him a glass and stared at the god for a while, just grinning. "What," Loki said finally.

"You like me," Tony said. "You really fucking like me."

"Don't get ahead of yourself, Stark," Loki said, though he couldn't fight the smile on his own lips. "I merely appreciate tolerating you."

"Bullshit," Tony said, taking another drink. "Go on. Tell me one thing you like about me and maybe, maybe I'll take off this jacket. You can earn it."

"Take off that jacket and you'll freeze your beautiful ass off you mortal creature," Loki said.

Tony laughed again. "Beautiful ass," Tony said. "Careful, before you know it you're going to swear better than Fury."

"That's hardly a swear, and if you mean to say I will sound like one of your Midgardian---" Loki stopped himself, catching sight of Tony's face. He was just so happy. There was nothing contrived about it, he was just so simplistically happy, and...Loki couldn't help it. He found that completely endearing. Frustrating, but endearing. "Fine," he said.

He heard Tony hiccup and glanced over incredulously. "Tony Stark, how drunk are you?"

"Babe," Tony said, taking another drink. "My liver could handle this entire winery."

"Right," Loki said, noticing that yes, the second bottle was mostly empty. He reached over and brushed back Tony's hair from his face, enjoying the sensation of it against his open hand.

"Don't," Tony whined when he took it away. He was struggling to keep his eyes open, and Loki was struggling to understand why exactly he was finding this side of Tony so enjoyable.

Loki stood up and walked over to where Tony was sitting. Tony giggled faintly and said something that Loki didn't catch. The god bent over and slipped his arms under the man, cradling him in his arms without much difficulty. "Not cool," Tony said. "I am a badass iron man, and I can't be manhandled," he said, slurring over the last word.

"I'll handle you anyway I please," Loki said, bringing them inside. "Now tell me, is the bedroom upstairs or down?"

"Upstairs," Tony said, a perk in his voice.

"Of course it is," Loki said, eyeing the sweeping staircase. "Hold on," he said, and a crackle of magic passed through them. A second later they were at the top of the stairs, and Loki was carrying him down a hallway to the open bedroom. He set Tony down on top of the bed and then headed towards the door. For a second he glanced over his shoulder to see Tony pushing at the tucked bedsheets, trying in vain to move them.

Downstairs he retrieved the suitcases and riffled through Tony's until he found suitable pajamas. "Move your arms," Loki said when he was back beside Tony, taking him out of the suit.

"Fine," Tony said, obliging. Loki laughed. Why was he finding this so amusing? He had Tony Stark changed, without magic, a few minutes later. He pulled back the sheets for Tony and watched him curl in. Magic changed his own attire and he sat down on the other side of the queen bed, looking down at a flushed Tony. The man glanced up at him for a moment, smiling. "You fucking like me," he said.

"Yeah," Loki said quiet enough that the man couldn't hear. He laid back in the bed, pulling the comforter over him. Tony scooted over, and with contentment, Loki felt those strong arms wrap around him. This was something that he had wanted for a very, very long time. He hadn't even really realized it until now, feeling like this. He turned over, Tony's arm still around him, just so that he could watch sleep take the mortal. Tony's face relaxed, his muscles calming. A gentle, steady breath drifted in and out of him. His hair was bedraggled and there was a whisper of a shadow around his face. For a long time Loki laid there watching him, breathing in the smell of him. He knew they had another day left together that weekend, but he couldn't imagine that anything tomorrow would be better than this moment.

Chapter End Notes

thanks to DarkFoxKirin for the business trip suggestion!

A Dream That I Dreamt

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Snowflakes drifted down from hazy gray skies, thick and buoyant on the lazy arctic wind that brushed past him. He turned his face skyward, closing his eyes, white flakes catching themselves in his eyelashes. Blinking, Loki allowed the snowflakes to remain there until they perished in moist lines down his warm face.

He began walking. His feet crunched down into the ice, puncturing their way down past the crisp top layer and into the soft fluff below. Occasionally he hit a patch of ground that was less shallow than the rest and sank further in, having to catch his balance. The snow gathering on his shoulders had begun to melt and sink down into the places where his armor was open and down the back of his neck. It was cold and unpleasant, and yet he made no attempt to change it.

Loki lost track of time, venturing further and further into the fields until at last he reached a small hill. Setting foot on the new horizon, he looked across another vast field, though this one was different. In the center was a short golden-beige tree, its branches desolate, open to the gray sky beyond them. Save one thing. A brilliantly colored bird, its body a kaleidoscope of translucent feathers in every shade of color that he could imagine.

Quickly, he trudged into the field, a sense of urgency encouraging his haste.

He made it to the center, sweat across his brow, icy water biting at his skin.

"Where is he?" Loki asked the bird.

The bird craned its head to the side, judging only one sharp eye necessary to evaluate the god beneath him. "There's no one here," the bird said from its narrow black beak.

"That's absurd," Loki replied. "You and I are both here."

"You are here, yes," the bird said. "And I am just you."

"There's no one else here," Loki said.

"There has never been anyone else here," the bird replied.

"Nonsense," Loki said. "I have seen Tony in this field before. And---"

"The mortal man?" The bird cried out, condescending and agitated. "Did I not just say there is only you? Only you. No other is worthy to walk these lands."

A standoff unfolded between the two, a terse silence fought only by gaze. "There will never be another here," the bird said when it could stare at Loki no longer. "Sentimental," it muttered derisively.

The bird saw Loki turning to leave before the immortal had realized it himself. "You're wasting your time," the bird said. Loki looked over to see a person standing beneath the branches, coming into focus. He recognized the woman. It was Pepper. "He will never choose you," the bird crooned.

Loki scoffed at the bird. "He will," Loki asserted. "No mortal can outsmart me," he said, voice

feral. "When I grow bored of my games, I will have him. He will be mine."

"You're wrong," the bird replied. "Look around you."

"Abandon it," Loki told the bird. "Be gone."

"You're alone, liar," the bird said, dissolving into nothingness. Loki glanced down at the tree to see that it was empty, and he truly was alone again. He felt sweat drip down his forehead.

He awoke in the bed, overheated and miserable. Pushing back one of the covers, the waking world came into focus. He heard his breathing, made out the shape of the closed bedroom door. Where was he again? The previous day began coming back as he understood the room. Slowly, cautiously, Loki looked down at the bed beside him and saw in the twist of blankets and bedsheets that another slept there. Tony was deep in sleep, his chest rising and falling with a steady repetition that Loki found comfort in. He reached his hand out beside him, just to be sure, and felt the warmth of a body beside him.

He laid back down in the bed, a placated sigh drifting across his pillow. It had just been a nightmare. Just a simple, stupid nightmare. Loki rolled over on his side, bringing his legs up around behind Tony, spooning in comfortably. The man did not awake. For a while Loki laid there like that, grateful that it was real. Then he found himself lowering his head down to rest his ear against Tony's exposed back, to listen to the heartbeat there. He was pleased to find that Tony was still dreaming as his long fingers slipped around the man's waist, gently pressing down into the shallow curve. Tony's sleeping breath stayed shallow and steady, his heart beating peacefully in the dark room. Loki closed his eyes, intent on staying sleeplessly entwined against his mortal until the sun crept in, breaking the night.

Chapter End Notes

sorry I'm only in the mood for writing fluff right now

The Time That I'll Take

There was always a chauffeured car waiting to pick Tony up from the airport when he returned to New York from his business trips. It was just that the car didn't always include Pepper, waiting to pounce on him.

The moment that Tony and a disguised Loki slid into the backseat, closing the doors, they heard her voice. "I trust that you had a good weekend," she said from the passenger seat. Loki heard the distinctive click of the car's locks and it shifting into drive. She turned around to face them, hair neatly done back in a pony tail, perfect makeup. It was an intimidating, calculated presentation.

"Yeah," Tony said, trying not to sound too interested or too disinterested. He attempted to make out who was in the driver side seat. Was it a regular employee? Shield agent? He couldn't decide, but either way it didn't matter. It wasn't someone that lived at Avengers Tower, so they didn't know about Loki's living arrangements. Hell, they didn't know it was Loki. Not that it would help if they did know it was Loki, he thought uncomfortably. He could never be seen returning from a business trip with Loki, even by tower residents. "It was fine," Tony said as level as he could.

"Fine," Pepper repeated sweetly, glancing over at Loki smugly. "Well I'm glad that you had a nice trip." They were leaving the airport now, heading towards the highway.

"Thank you," Loki said, locking eyes with her. He pushed at the seatbelt to get some slack and carelessly lifted his legs up into Tony's lap. "We had a wonderful time."

Tony grabbed onto Loki's shins, carefully, easing them back onto the floor. He kept his attention locked on the driver, praying that Loki would put two and two together. An employee might keep seeing those advances to themselves, but a Shield agent would have the sense to suspect something was amiss. Especially with Pepper sitting right there. The playboy angle wouldn't work. Besides, Shield had a file that was a mile long on him. Their tabs had tabs. He didn't need to give them a reason to get curious, and Loki wasn't helping. "Did you have a good weekend, Pepper?"

"Yeah," she said. "Nat and I went down to that wine bar again. I was sorry to hear that you missed out on an important residents' meeting," she said to Loki. "Sounds like they missed you."

"Did they," Loki replied coldly.

"I'm sure you'll take care not to miss the next one," she smiled. "We like to keep all of our assistants up to date." He curled up his lips unkindly in response. "We also made some progress. Bruce told me that he completed that machine." She turned back around to face the passing roads.

"No way," Tony said. "Not possible." He had spent hours and hours looking at that thing, there was absolutely no way that Bruce had cracked it. He was brilliant, but, no offense, Tony thought, he graduated MIT with two masters degrees by nineteen. If someone had solved it, it would've been him.

"Oh it's very possible," Pepper said, a playful note in her tone. She knew that it would eat Tony up that he hadn't been the one to figure it out, and she thought that was reasonable payback for his weekend excursion. "So it looks like our profits are about to rise."

Tony didn't answer her, he just looked out the window. Loki watched him with mild curiosity, and then looked back at Pepper and the driver. He *had* put two and two together. Disguise or not, this weekend he'd had Tony all to himself, out in the open. Now that they were returning, when anyone

else was around, he wouldn't be able to act freely with Tony in the tower. Not even the car ride back was free of the charade. He had enjoyed the thrill of that before, but right now the thought was wedging its way uncomfortably down into him. Pepper could act however she pleased with Tony in public. As they entered Manhattan everyone was silent.

"You've already contacted Shield," Tony said as they turned down a familiar street.

"I have," Pepper confirmed. "I haven't told them everything, but they're definitely interested."

The car was arriving at Avengers Tower. "Any idea how much they want for it?"

"You can ask them yourself," Pepper said, turning back around. "You're coming with me, and he's staying here."

Loki stared at her, incredulous. "You don't need to go to Shield headquarters. Your services are needed elsewhere," she said diplomatically. "I believe the downstairs office needs cleaning. If you would," she said, inclining her head towards the door. "We have to hurry, Tony and I have another flight to catch." The driver was already getting out of the car, walking towards his door to open it. She took the opportunity to lean in closer to Loki and say quietly, quickly, "It's not *my* first business trip." A satisfied gleam crossed her eyes as she read the confusion and jealousy in his. The door beside him opened.

"Sir," the driver said anxiously, impatiently. Loki glanced up at him with a snarl and back on over to Pepper, desperate to get a word in edgewise, delayed by his uncertainty of how to do that as a personal assistant and the fumes of anger boiling up inside him. "Sir."

"Sorry, he just got the job," Tony said to the driver, excusing his personal assistant for ignoring the driver. Loki broke his stare down with Pepper for Tony. "It's fine," Tony said from the bottom of his voice, looking into Loki's eyes briefly. This wasn't the time or place to reassure him, it would have to be enough. "Thanks for your help," he said politely, distancing them.

Loki stepped out of the car, irate. He did not look over his shoulder as he walked into the building. He did not stay to watch the car pull away. If he had he would've seen Tony watching him very, very closely.

"God," Tony said later that evening, when they were alone, "do you have to stir him up like that?"

"He got to spend a weekend off with you," Pepper said. "Secretely, I might add."

A nervous shiver ran down his spine. "Pep, seriously, don't set him off."

"It'll be fine," Pepper reassured him. Tony wasn't so certain.

Loki's luck did not change when he walked into the tower from the car. Natasha was already waiting for him in the lobby. He had the distinct feeling that more planning had gone into this than he had realized.

"For you," Natasha said, extending out her hand. A small white envelope was in her palm. He looked at her outstretched hand, then back up at her illegible expression, and then back down at the envelope. He had visions of her hand wrapping around his wrist and bones breaking. "Take it," she said.

With lightning speed he tore it from her hand, careful not to touch skin. "What is it?" he said

without looking at the paper so as not to direct his attention away from her.

"It's an invitation," she replied. Loki was getting rather tired of those.

"How long have you been waiting here?"

"Since your chauffeur called to say you were on your way," she grinned. "Would you like to share how you got Stark Industries to pay for your little joy ride around town?"

So that was the story they were playing with. "Not particularly," Loki replied.

"What did you go to see?" Natasha asked.

Loki tore at the envelope, ignoring her question but not looking away from her.

"Name one thing," Natasha said.

"Why, Agent Romanov," Loki said, comfortably slipping into condescension, "if I didn't know better, I'd think you were rather hurt by my absence. Could it be that you wanted to come along?" He smiled at her with glared eyes, knowing damn well that the answer was no.

"Don't flatter yourself," Natasha replied dully.

"Perhaps Agent Barton would care to hear of your newfound interest in me," he said. "I do know well of his interest in you," Loki said, hissing his words down into an implicating purr.

Crossing her arms Natasha took a tiny step towards him. "Am I to understand that as a threat?" She said. "Surely you know what threatening one of us will earn you."

"Tell me," Loki shot back, genuinely enjoying the conflict, "Does the god of thunder know that you're bullying his dear younger brother?"

Natasha stepped back. Her eyes flickered towards the envelope in his hands. It was the slightest action, hardly noticeable, but he caught it. "That wouldn't stop me," she said softly, as though she didn't want to be overheard. "And about that," she said a tad louder, "I find it funny that you came here for a little bonding time and have avoided him ever since."

Her eyes were bright, self-assured. "And by funny I mean to say that---"

"Really," Loki cut her off. He stepped forward, noting with satisfaction that she switched into an active fighting stance with his motion, "for I find it exasperating that you've taken such interest, and assumed so much. You know nothing of our race," he snarled, "And I find it boringly typical that you presume to."

She could almost feel the anger emanating from him in waves. Tipping his self-control could mean him lashing out, and his expulsion from the tower. It could even mean grounds for another, more permanent fight. On the other hand, it would also mean Thor's disappointment and erasing all of the progress the two had made since Loki arrived, as easily as blackboard dust.

She also had to consider that sending Loki over the edge meant there would be a present battle as well, and Natasha wasn't certain that she *could* take him. Not when she considered that he could use magic. That wasn't exactly something that any of them were knowledgeable on or prepared to deal with.

Besides, there was something particularly vile unhinging in his eyes that she was very uncertain of,

she thought with clenched teeth.

"I just came to deliver that invitation," Natasha said, backing off. "I think it would be wise to accept it," she added, stepping further away.

"I care nothing for your thoughts," Loki spat back at her. "Your interest lies only in serving yourself. Tell me, do you think this," he said, holding up the torn envelope, "will help clear your silly little ledger as well?"

A hundred counter arguments flew into her mind but she used none of them. She had not intended to prod him this far, and he had become upset much faster than she'd anticipated. "I'm not presuming anything," she said, gently borrowing his words from before.

"That is where you are wrong!" Loki screamed at her. He heard his voice echo off the walls and back at her. That was what it took for him to realize that he was flirting with expulsion. If he stepped too far Tony wouldn't be there to intervene, and though Thor had been a marvelous card to play so far, Loki knew that wouldn't last forever either. He took in a deep breath, reigning himself in. "Be so kind," he said darkly, "Not to interfere with the matter of Thor and I."

The Black Widow nodded, precariously observing the god's face flush with anger, the dark circles looming under his eyes, the minute slouch in his posture that suggested weariness.

Loki left her, vanishing in a burst of mossy green. She waved the smoke away from her face, coughing. Then she made her way to the elevator.

When she arrived at the lab she was disappointed to find that Bruce was not there. He had spent the entire weekend down there, it was strange that he had left. "Jarvis," she said. "Where is Bruce Banner?"

"He's presently unavailable," Jarvis said. This was an unusual response. Natasha could not recall a time that she had heard Jarvis use the phrase. "Is he in the tower?"

"Mr. Banner is presently unavailable," Jarvis repeated. Frustrated, Natasha ignored the AI and decided to look for him herself.

She tried the kitchen, the living room, one of Tony's offices, the balcony. They were all empty. With no other likely options, she headed towards the least desirable location, Bruce's floor. She rarely went there, and it seemed the slightly impertinent to do so.

"Hello?" She called out when the doors slid open. The hallway that the elevator opened onto was dark. Stepping out, her movement triggered the lights. They flickered before fully turning on. "Bruce," she said, cautiously taking a few steps towards the only ajar door that she could see. Now that she was closer she could hear the faint mumble of voices. There were also footsteps, coming closer to her.

She put her back up against the wall, creeping towards the open door. She heard its hinges swing wide. "Hey," Bruce said, his head popping out. He stepped into the hallway, closing the door behind him.

"Jarvis wouldn't tell me where you were," she said, "and don't tell me that's who I think it is in there."

"If you're going to say Loki, it is," Bruce said.

"Bruce," Natasha said in a whisper, "He almost went ballistic downstairs. Are you sure you want

him up here?"

"I already heard about it from him," Bruce whispered back. "And trust me, I know I'm messing with crazy."

"Yeah, but Bruce," Natasha said, "he's a little more than that."

"It's like I told everyone this weekend," Bruce said, "I'm getting valuable information out of this. Besides," he whispered, "I think we still have the upper hand here for now."

"Bruce," Natasha said, latching onto his name with warning, "Something's not right with him today."

"Something's always not right with him," Bruce said.

"Do you want me to stick around here?" Natasha asked.

"If something happens I've got the other guy," Bruce said. "And Loki is just asking questions about wine now, I think it's going to be okay."

"Wine?" Natasha said. "He's trading you Asgardian technology for *wine tips*."

"Maybe he wants to open his own wine bar, I don't know," Bruce said, rolling his eyes. "Who knows what's going on in that bag of cats."

Natasha felt slightly better. "Are you sure you don't want me to stick around?"

"I appreciate the heads up," Bruce said. "But I think it's going to be alright. And *you* should avoid him for a while," Bruce said in a barely audible whisper.

"Gladly," Natasha whispered back. Bruce nodded and watched her disappear into the elevator before opening the door back to his living room. With mild relief he saw that Loki was still there, flipping idly through a copy of Smithsonian Magazine. He brightened when Bruce sat back down, and picked up his questions about the cultural prestige of wine. Patiently Bruce answered them, though he was having a hard time not letting on just how absurd he found the whole thing to be.

When Loki left later that day it was on the promise of curing a viral strain after their next meeting. Bruce picked up the magazine that Loki had been flipping through and shoved it back onto a shelf. He was glad that he'd met with Loki on his floor instead. At least this time he hadn't spent half of the time looking around, wondering which seemingly benign item was actually a death trap. Bruce's rooms didn't have potted plants that morphed into arrows, or enchanted flames licking up around the fireplace, sinister and uninviting.

Up in that room, Loki laid back in his usual chair, resting his feet beside the offending potted plant. He took the envelope out of his pocket, tugging out the paper from the jaws of the jagged edge he'd torn earlier.

Loki,

Please help us in celebrating Steve Roger's birthday.

A party will be held this Tuesday on the rooftop balcony at 4 pm.

We would like it if you would come.

-The Residents of Avengers Tower

The paper crinkled in protest as he turned it over in his hands. Eggs whisking around a bowl came to mind, Steve's modest gestures, his steady reasoning. Loki sighed and set the invitation on the table. Now that he was back in the tower he realized that he had missed his bed, and the lounge he'd built for himself. More than anything he just wanted to sink down under his covers and sleep.

Standing from the chair, his hand reached across his chest and began to unfasten one of the straps there. His garb fell onto the floor just before his bedroom door and he stepped over the trail of clothing, past the threshold. The toffee colored satin bedspread brushed past his skin as he sank in, burying his face into the cream colored down pillow. He kicked the sheets out of the way and nestled in, pulling them back up over his shoulders.

A tiny smile crept across his face as he recalled that past weekend, Tony's drunken babbling, walking the wine fields together in the morning, Tony going on about some specificity of the fermentation process. With satisfaction he thought of Bruce saying that some wines in Boredeaux were particularly prestigious. Tony had spared no expense for him.

With these pleasant thoughts in place Loki drifted off to sleep, pushing away everything that had happened since the airport.

"Is he coming?" Clint quietly asked Bruce that afternoon, around 3:45 pm.

"Your guess is as good as mine," Bruce said, tying a balloon. Decked out in red, white, and blue, the rooftop balcony was nearly complete. Clint ripped open a pack of beef patties to throw on the grill.

"Hmm," was his only response.

Natasha walked up beside him, plucking a bag of chips from the grill side table. "How'd that meeting go with him yesterday?" She asked Bruce.

"Excruciatingly boring and mildly frightening," Bruce said, throwing away the empty balloon bag. "He's always cagey, but, yeah, I could see why you were concerned yesterday."

"You're insane," Clint said. He glanced over to the corner of the rooftop where Thor was occupying himself by rearranging the patio furniture. He dropped his voice down lower. "Loki's going to flip out on you. Maybe he'll build that wine bar first," Clint said with a muffled laugh, "but he will snap."

Natasha crunched down on a chip. "I have to agree with him," she said to Bruce.

"Yeah, well, curing a virus that affects 60,000 people is worth a little temper tantrum," Bruce replied, also glancing over towards Thor. The Norse god was rearranging the same chair for the fifth time. "I kind of hope that he does show up," Bruce said. "I don't know how much more of *that* I can take."

Clint flexed his arms anxiously. "You and me both," he said. Picking up a spatula, he pushed one of the beef patties down against the grill, just to listen to it hiss back at him. "At least Tony's not here."

Bruce shrugged. "Because of Steve or because of Loki?"

"Both," Clint said.

"I don't think we're ever going to see Tony and Loki in the same room," Bruce said. "His issue with Steve might blow over though."

Natasha popped another chip into her mouth. "What exactly," she said, swallowing, "is their problem right now?"

"Steve thinks he's being an unsupportive jackass, though not in those words," Clint said, gesturing with the spatula, "And I'm not sure what Tony's excuse is."

"He thinks that Steve is being too overbearing and acting like he knows what's best for everyone," Bruce said.

Natasha shook her head. "Thor," she called out, unable to watch him rearrange furniture any longer, "Why don't you go downstairs and get Steve?"

Thor looked up at her and nodded. "Right away," he called back to her.

"If Loki doesn't come today," Natasha said once he had left, "one of us needs to tell Thor to give it up. This is becoming cruel."

"He's never going to give up hope," Clint said dismissively, smashing another burger down against the grill. "God knows why though."

"Has Loki said anything about Thor to you?" Natasha asked Bruce.

"No," Bruce said, "And I'm not going to ask him."

"Good choice," Clint said.

Natasha shook the bag of chips, their rattling drowning out the sound of the grill momentarily. She set them back down on the table and put a hand over her eyes, blocking out the sun. The day was bright and cloudless, a typical July afternoon. In the makeshift shade of her palm she was the first one to notice the hazy outline of a slender being coming into focus. "Heads up," she muttered, gesturing towards the spot where Loki now stood.

He blinked in the sunlight, then seemed more distracted by the festive balloons and streamers than interested in the three humans watching apprehensively. Dressed in casual Midgardian wear, he almost looked...approachable.

Suddenly Clint was absorbed in cooking burgers, Bruce had something extremely important to check on his phone, and Natasha had taken up an interest in the bag of chips again. Loki glanced over at them awkwardly and back around the empty patio.

He was almost grateful when he saw two forms coming through the glass patio doors. Almost.

"Happy Birthday!" The small group called out to Steve. He smiled back at the trio and then noticed Loki standing off to the side.

"Thanks guys," he said, directing his attention towards everyone. "Why don't we all sit down," he said, jerking his head towards the cluster of patio chairs.

Loki was the last to sit down with them, though it worked out in his favor. He took a corner chair where the only one beside him was Bruce. "So how many years is this for you," Clint said to Steve, "90? 95?"

"Something like that," Steve said, grinning. "You'll be lucky if you look like this at my age."

"Yeah, alright old man," Clint said. "You can have some lollies for your good behavior if you think they're hotsy-totsy," he said, imitating Steve, "as long as they don't stick to your dentures."

Steve shook his head with a low laugh before saying, "As captain, I think it's on my authority to assign you cleaning duties for disrespecting the elderly."

"I think the burgers are almost done," Clint said, getting up, a smile still on his face. As the conversation shifted elsewhere Loki thought about 90 or 95. That was so *young*. Thor was even older than him. How many times had Thor heard conversations like this? These humans around him were just fireflies, passing through, why was he so invested? How foolish.

Clint was back with the group, a stack of plates in one hand and a tray of burgers in the other. He set them down on the low patio table and then left to go grab drinks. Without skipping a beat the group was passing plates around, trading silverware, grabbing bags of chips and condiments. They were all so comfortable around each other, it was a bit like spying on a family dinner.

"We can see the ones they shoot off over the Hudson," Clint was saying. "This'll be your first time seeing them, right Thor?"

"We have something similar on Asgard," Thor said. "Loki and I used to watch them," he said, hopefully. At his name the trickster looked up, abandoning his own thoughts.

"We did," Loki said noncommittally.

Thor decided to run with it. "Your favorite was the wolf."

"These fireworks aren't going to be shaped like anything," Clint said quickly, not wanting Thor to get his hopes up.

"Perhaps then we can put on a show," Thor said eagerly, "Loki is quite skilled at magic."

Instantly Loki found five pairs of eyes intensely focused on him.

"That'd be really neat," the birthday boy said earnestly.

"Loki is one of the most skilled spell casters in Asgard," Thor said, "The best, even."

Loki could not recall a time in recent months when so much attention had been focused so keenly on him.

"It *is* Steve's birthday," Clint said.

"That it is," Steve said.

"I bet it would make a good present," Clint hinted.

"Fine," Loki said, "If only to halt your incessant begging."

"That's Loki for 'you're welcome,'" Clint said in the voice of an announcer. Loki glared back at him but otherwise let it slide. He was too irritated by the subtle excitement he could read in Thor to put much energy into anything else.

"Great," Steve said. "Can't wait."

"Do we have any more ketchup?" Bruce said, standing up.

"Inside, on the refrigerator door," Steve told him. Bruce left the group and came back a few minutes later to find that they were discussing the plot to a recent movie. For the friends the afternoon turned into evening quickly, as they hopped across familiar topics with ease. For the two brothers the evening came at a slow crawl, the cautious tension between them impeding the hands of time.

When twilight finally spread out across the sky Loki found that he had all eyes on him again. Obliging, he rose slowly from his chair, setting a cup of beer that had found its way into his hands earlier on the table. Momentarily he stretched, leisurely bending one arm into a V and pulling it with the other. He crossed the patio, flexing his arms in his cotton t-shirt as he did.

"I don't know about this," Clint whispered to Natasha as they watched him raise his arms up. She shrugged, not disagreeably. Sulphur permeated the air, fire on its trail. A tiny bead of light rose up into the sky above them, pirouetting in a high pitched whistle. It climbed higher and higher into the atmosphere until they heard a distinctive pop. Light rained down on them, a shower of sparks, fizzing musically as they hit the pavement without a mark. Natasha reached out her hand. A yellow glow outlined her fingers as her skin passed through the lines, unscathed. She glanced back at Clint, who hadn't had time to conceal his awe.

When the last of the sparks had fallen to the ground they pooled together, light slipping into itself like water beneath the team's feet. Spinning, the light shot out, trailing up into the sky again before exploding in a dazzling array of color. Downward, the lights flickered until they had faded. Silence rested for a heart beat before a crackle snapped through the air again and sparks shot together, forming a pack of wolves. Like painted outlines they leapt down from the sky, running around the team, howling in puffs of smoke. One leaned forward to nip at Clint, who jumped up into his chair swearing. The wolf veered off in another direction, and though the crumbling burn of sparks was difficult to hear over, Clint swore he could hear a throaty laugh from Loki.

Without skipping a beat the wolves morphed into a flock of eagles, circling Steve's head before rocketing back up into the sky and exploding in another shower of dazzling sparks. They collected themselves and exploded in succession, each a different color. Finally they began to climb up into the sky again, a faint screech in their wake. Looking away, Thor saw an old smile on Loki's face. The god moved his arms gracefully, conducting the array of sparks in the sky, a faint touch of musicality in his movement. In the next moment there was an explosion and sparks rained down past them again in beads of light, scattering off the edges of the patio and bouncing all around it. The orbs produced little musical pitches with each surface they contacted, creating a haunting melody of another place before they lost momentum and dissipated into the ground.

When the last note faded away the team collected themselves, coming out of their amazed stupor. Loki walked back over to them, each footfall braced by confidence.

"That was really something," Steve said first. "Thank you."

"Child's play," Loki said.

"Not anyone could do that," Thor said with a hint of pride.

"Yeah, that was actually kind of okay," Clint admitted.

With closed lips Loki smiled, more for himself than them. He settled back down into his chair, taking a sip from his beer.

"How long did that take you to learn?"

Minutely, Loki's head tilted to the side. It was a strange question for him to consider. The answer was tucked away so far back in his memory that it was nearly forgotten. "One book had it," Loki said, completely unable to piece together a time line. "I don't think it took very long."

"Could we see that book?" Clint asked.

"I doubt the All-father would grant you access to his library," Loki said.

"But if he could, if we could see that book, would one of us be able to do that?" Bruce asked, eager to get in some of his own questions on the god.

"No," Loki said bluntly.

"And why not?"

Beside Steve Thor sat forward in his chair apprehensively. "Not all Asgardians are blessed with the same traits," he said.

"Some might say not even all beings are blessed with the same traits," Loki replied brashly.

"How does it work though?" Bruce asked.

"How do you turn into a green beast?" Loki said not a second later.

"Okay," Steve cut in, "I think we can agree that everyone's got something super about them and leave it at that."

"Only if you're counting super good looks for Natasha and me," Clint said. "We can't all be super human."

"Super human looks, Barton?" Natasha said, systematically de-mantling the building tension like a simple machine, "That's not very modest," she smiled.

"Oh, so I'm supposed to look like 90 year old baby face over here?" He said, gesturing towards Steve, acutely aware of Natasha's shared motivation. From the corner of his eye he could see Loki's coiled features, primed to spring, Thor's ready stance.

"It wouldn't hurt," Natasha said. "I mean, between him, Bruce, and two gods here, you're kind of at a disadvantage. I on the other hand," she smirked, playfully flipping a lock of hair, "don't have any competition."

"By default," Clint said. "But I think Thor has the better hair."

Thor looked at him curiously. "What do you mean to say?"

Clint helped himself to a lock of the god's loose blond hair. Thor good-naturedly allowed him to do so, though he wasn't sure of the archer's intentions. "Look at the shine on this. Your hair can't do that Natasha."

Her pinched face evaluated that swiftly before relaxing into confidence. "Sure it can," she said, holding her head beside the outstretched lock of hair. "Banner," she said, "you're a scientist. Give us your best opinion."

"No way," Bruce said, leaning into the furthest back corner of his chair. "No way."

"Fine," Clint said. "Steve? Loki? Who has the best hair?"

"They both look great," Steve said awkwardly, not sure whether to laugh at the pair's odd behavior or be scared. Knowing those two, the answer could be both.

Loki was openly amused, if not a bit condescendingly so. "I had no knowledge of the Midgardian fascination with hair." Natasha and Clint relaxed, seeing that the tension between the two brothers had calmed back down to its usual state.

"For someone so obsessed with his own hair I'm a little surprised," Clint said.

"Are you," Loki said, mischief flickering across his words, "could it be that you are jealous, Barton?"

"Nah," Clint said. "My hair has enough grease." He had released Thor's hair at this point, and he gestured to his own short scruff of hair.

Loki smirked and an instant later long, silky brown tresses fell down over Clint's shoulders and onto the floor. For a moment Clint was completely frozen in shock until Natasha's poorly contained laugh released him from surprise. The sound broke Bruce, who began laughing whole heartedly, and caught onto Steve and Thor. "Son of a bitch," Clint said to the team. They were dissolving into hysterical laughter.

"I'll braid it for you," Natasha said, short of breath.

"Change it back," Clint snapped at Loki. The trickster shrugged.

"You'll just have to cut it off," he said. Clint was certain that he was lying.

"I look like Rapunzel," Clint said indignantly, wishing fervently that he had let Loki and Thor fight instead.

"Nonsense," Natasha said, "Rapunzel made it look cute."

"Sing us a song," Steve laughed, a tear at the corner of his eye. They all hadn't had a laugh like this in months.

"I'm not singing you a fuckin' song," Clint said.

"Come on, just one," Steve said.

Clint stood up from his chair, pushing the hair away from his face. To his dismay it was heavy and had already tangled itself into the little metal crevices. "Ow!" He jumped as a few of his hairs ripped out with his departure from the chair. It lurched forward as he tried to get away. This sent the team into another fit of laughter. "Hahaha," Clint said, pulling a knife out of his pocket and sawing away at it. The brown strands fell to the floor around him. When he put the knife back away his hair was shoulder length and jagged.

"Sit here," Natasha said, scooting over. She grabbed the loose strands and braided them away from his face in seconds. "Better?"

Clint just glowered at Loki.

In the distance they heard the faint sound of fireworks. "That'd be the ones on the Hudson," Bruce said. Getting up, they made their way over to the balcony's edge and looked out. Colored lights

exploded in the distance.

"They're going to remember that for a long time," Thor said quietly to his brother after they'd been watching for a few minutes.

"Oh I don't see the harm in a little jest," Loki said.

"Not that," Thor said. "Your magic."

Loki waited for Thor to look over at him, to read him better. But the brawny god just continued to watch the small show in the distance, arms resting on the railing, a faint night breeze brushing a strand of blond hair past his face. Turning away, Loki gazed without focus at the tiny fireworks in the distance, questions for Thor multiplying in his mind.

A Rainy Day That We Had

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Rain collided forcefully with the windowpanes, drumming up a dull thrum that had persisted since the early hours of the morning. Aside from the dreary weather, the inside of the tower was uncharacteristically quiet. Natasha and Clint had left in the early morning hours on an undisclosed mission. Steve had settled into drawing up in his room, and Bruce was out for the day consulting at a research laboratory. Though it was around eleven, the hour that Tony would typically arise, clamoring for coffee, the kitchen was empty. Tony and Pepper were still gone on their business trip.

It was under these circumstances that the two Asgardians found themselves occupying the same room, not unwittingly.

Thor had already been in the living room, irritably trying to Skype with Jane Foster through a patchy connection, when Loki walked in. Seeing that Tony's beloved technology was failing, Loki made a mental note to tease him for it later. He sat down on the couch and flipped on the TV, pretending not to listen to his adopted brother's conversation. It didn't last long, but it did end with an obnoxiously sweet argument over who would hang up first. That didn't bother Loki as much as might have before, though.

Slowly, carefully, Thor lifted his glance from the computer screen over towards the couch Loki occupied. He felt the familiar curl of adrenaline, ready and waiting at his disposal. In the weeks since his brother had moved in Thor had gotten a handful of time in with the trickster, and only once had it been without the group.

He ran through dialogue in his head, all of the advice that the Midgardians had been pouring over him, and their warnings. His brother's attention stayed focused on the TV, but Thor knew him well enough to see through that. Momentarily, he closed out of a few programs, buying time. *Don't rush him*, he recalled Steve saying. *Take your time*, Natasha had said.

He clicked the internet open again and closed it, watching Loki out of the corner of his eye. *We want him to come home*, he recalled his parents saying. He was disappointing them.

By the nine, he didn't know what to do with his little brother anymore. With a sigh of frustration he stood up from the computer, picking up the glass of water that was beside it.

"What do you mean to do about her?" Loki said. Thor turned towards him, towards his abrupt questioning.

"What do you mean?" Thor asked, anxious.

Loki leaned one arm against the back of the couch, studying him. "She's mortal."

"Yes," Thor said, instantly tired. "She is."

"Well," Loki said, "Do you intend to change that?"

Thor set the glass of water from his hand back onto the table. "If you mean to play games, be warned that---"

"---I do not mean to play games," Loki said, leaning forward. "I am merely curious. How do you do it? How do you watch these mortals walk before you, knowing their fate? How do you invest yourself in their lives?"

Thor shifted the weight back and forth on his feet, taking his time to answer. "I appreciate the present. These are their lives, I do not---" His voice faded. "I do not scorn their fragile existence."

"You don't think of giving them a golden apple?"

"You know as well as I that Idunn would never let it come to pass," Thor said. "And no, I do not," he said forcefully.

His brother was staring down at the couch, running his pointer finger back and forth across the fabric. "They are not of Asgard," Thor said to him, "And it is not their place. It is not fair to them."

"And you love her?"

"It would be cruel," Thor said with a note of anger.

"What? Granting her immortal life?"

"I do not understand your sudden interest," Thor said.

"Living among mortals has made me wonder," Loki said. "I merely am curious of your perspective."

"Loki," Thor said. "To take their mortality would be to take something essential to their being."

"Yes," Loki said spitefully, "something that Asgard is well accustomed to."

Thor shook his head. "You will always be welcome among us Loki, and I do not wish to quarrel."

"Not today," Loki said calmly.

"Do you, could it be that you are concerned for these Avengers?" Thor ventured.

Loki scoffed, but Thor did not believe it. He looked back down at the table to hide his pride from his brother. So he was making progress on Earth after all.

"Loki," Thor said, "appreciate them for who they are, not the time that they will be."

"Hmmm," was all he said in response. Thor crossed the room and sat down on a chair beside the couch. Loki didn't move, just stared blankly at the TV ahead. It was flashing nonsense.

"There is a comedy that is quite popular here," Thor said, picking up one of the remotes. Effortlessly he flipped through the recordings. When Loki did not protest he clicked it. Quietly, they settled into watching the show together. Thor tried softening his laughter, and was surprised to hear his brother's laughter occasionally.

The rain had ceased when they went their separate ways in the evening, one to curl up and nap by his fire and the other to run in the gym, to sort his thoughts.

No worries, some Tony centric chapters will come. Thor and Loki just needed some time.

The Time That Was Mine

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Stark Industries had made twenty-five million dollars off of Shield that week, but that wasn't the real prize. The real prize was the tiniest hint that Fury was impressed by Tony. Not that he'd admit it of course, but Tony knew. And that was a far better payment than money. Well, that, and knowing that Shield wouldn't catch the fail-safe that Tony had programmed into the machine he'd sold them. He knew better than to just hand them something like that.

Of course, Pepper and he had a very nice week touring D.C., but the marathon of business trips was making Tony's head spin. He needed some time to sort things out, and that was how he found himself alone on the interstate now, speeding in a rented sports car with the wind in his hair. His absence meant that Pepper and Loki would both be in the tower together without him, a thought that made him reasonably uncomfortable. He compensated for it by programming Jarvis to prevent them from accessing the floor that the other one was on. He prayed to no one in particular that Jarvis wouldn't have to put the new programming to the test.

He caught sight of a police car several hundred yards away and hit his brakes, slowing down just in time to narrowly avoid a speeding ticket. This joy ride would've been easier in the Iron Man suit, where he could be as reckless as he wanted, but there was something about the feeling of slamming his foot against the pedal that the suit just couldn't quite match.

The car barreled down country interstates, music screeching against the backdrop of sloping farmland. The further he went, the further away his thoughts seemed to get. By the time he pulled off on an exit to fill the tank back up the only thing still on his mind was the hope that there was a Burger King somewhere in the next fifty miles.

Tony slid his credit card back into his wallet and sat back down in the driver's seat. With a full tank of gas, he could go in any direction he wanted. That was the only decision he had to make. Well, that and which music he wanted. Still, they were simple, easy decisions, and god, did he need that right now.

Over the course of the week it had become less and less deniable for Tony that this act would one day come to an end. Loki and Pepper wouldn't play the dating game with him forever, and the thought was killing him. So he drowned it out with sound and movement and promised himself that he'd figure it out later.

Hell, in a way he envied the two of them. They knew what end they wanted. Tony didn't. He shifted the car back into drive and set out for the highway again.

Twenty five miles out he found himself wondering why he couldn't have it both ways. Why it couldn't go on and on. He knew, of course. Pepper and Loki wouldn't have it. Pepper would only tolerate looking back over her shoulder for so long. Shit, he didn't even know how she'd made it *this* long. And Loki, he had no intention of sharing or playing second string. He had decided that Tony would be his. He'd made that very clear. Even, Tony thought, if Loki hadn't admitted it.

Why else would he move in? He could spirit Tony away any time he wanted. Coming to the tower wasn't some whim, it had serious implications. Fuck, Tony knew that there were times that living there was fucking hard on Loki. And yet he stayed. What would Thor do when he found out why Loki really was there? If he found out. Tony had no desire to be around if that happened. He had no

clue how the god would take it, and he didn't want to find out.

That was the one saving grace, he supposed. For now only the three of them knew, and, he realized, the moment that he did choose, that was going to change. Eventually, the team *would* find out. Shit, fuck, he felt sick. This was exactly why he had been trying not to think about it. He turned the music up louder and focused on the passing pavement instead.

Whoever thought the playboy lifestyle was carefree and easy was an idiot and he wanted to punch them.

Things would work themselves out, he reasoned. They would have to. There was no reason to panic. Everything was fine. Everything was just fine. There was no use in worrying. He was just going to enjoy the shit out of this while it lasted and then deal with whatever came next. That was fine, right? Okay.

He sped on until his mind cleared itself out again. By then the sun was beginning to set. He turned the car around, in the direction of New York. After musing over the idea of staying at a hotel, he decided to return to the tower instead. He'd had enough rented rooms for now.

Around 11:30 that night he made it back. All he wanted to do, he thought, stepping into the elevator, was fall into his bed and not think. Scratch that. All he wanted to do was have a whisky and pass out in bed. That sounded nice. He punched the button for the kitchen.

When the doors opened he found Natasha sitting at the table, drinking something (tea?) and looking at an e-reader. She ignored him until he'd taken the whisky out of the cabinet, intent on disappearing. "You missed quite a show this weekend," she said, not glancing up.

"Yeah?" Tony said dully, making it very clear that he did not want her to continue.

"Sit down," she said. When he didn't make a move she repeated herself. "Trust me," she said.

"As far as I can throw you," Tony said, cautiously taking a seat. She smiled, flattered.

"So what happened this weekend?" Tony said, pouring himself a glass. He'd consider this pre-gaming. "Did Cap put something metal in the microwave?"

"Not even close," Natasha said. "Though you did miss his birthday," she said. Tony felt bad about that but she didn't say it judgmentally. "And Loki's firework display."

"What?" He said, nearly knocking his glass over.

"Mhmm," Natasha said. "It was really something. Even Clint said so."

Tony would have to look through his surveillance footage for that. Actually, maybe he'd ask Loki himself. Wait, had Loki been festive without him? Better yet, had Loki been in a good mood? A firework throwing mood? What. the. hell.

He tried picturing it but he couldn't get past maniacal cackling and brightly colored explosions.

"But how'd the meeting with Shield go?"

Tony took a drink. He knew that she already knew how it went. She had no trouble accessing that sort of information. "Fantastic," he said. "I might have to make a frequent customer punch card for them."

She grinned. "I bet they'd love that." She flipped her e-reader over. "Loki and Thor also made some progress this weekend," she said. Tony stayed silent, waiting for her to continue. "Apparently," she said suspiciously, "he even spent a couple of hours watching television with Thor."

Tony shrugged. "So? Didn't he come here for a little brotherly bonding time?"

"If that machine works," she said, "and it can imprison things, maybe you should seriously consider hooking it up to Jarvis."

"Yeah, two steps ahead of you," Tony said. Of course he'd improved his security system. He just had no intention of using it on the new resident.

"Loki's asking questions," Natasha said calmly, "And you're not around to notice."

"What do you mean I'm not around to notice?"

"The next time that everyone's together, you should come along."

"Yeah, thanks mom, I'll try and play nice with others," Tony said, standing up from the table and taking his glass with him.

"That's not what I mean," Natasha said. "You're becoming distant and there's a half crazed demi-god living in our basement. We need you, Tony." She said it like a fact, like the most obvious statement in the world. "Loki's been here far longer than any of us expected and we need our resident genius keeping an eye on him. You don't get to clock out just because this is hard."

"First of all," Tony said, "he's not crazy and he doesn't live in the basement. He has a floor. And second, was that a compliment Natasha?" He said, grinning.

"If you think your job is a compliment," she said dismissively.

"Oh, so me being a genius is my job now," Tony said. "And here I thought it was just another part of my charming personality," he said, taking another drink.

"Look, I don't know what he did to you the last time he came here, and you don't have to tell me," Natasha said. "I know you avoid him. Fine. I get it. I'm not asking you to be best friends with him. I'm just saying that Loki is a lot for us to handle and we need all of our team paying attention."

"Everything's fine," Tony said dismissively.

"Tony," Natasha said. "I still don't have Loki's angle. It's not fine. The longer he's here, the more dangerous this gets. He could be plotting anything."

Tony shrugged. "He could be doing anything," Tony said flatly, trying not to acknowledge the pun in his head. "And I don't really have time to babysit him." He didn't like the glare she was giving him. "But if makes you feel better, I'll come play in the sandbox the next time you guys have recess."

She didn't stop him from going back over to the elevator and stepping inside. Instead they watched each other until the doors separated them, Tony smiling sarcastically and waving goodbye. Natasha really wanted to tell him that Bruce was meeting with Loki. It was Bruce's place to tell Tony, but she also knew that it would be the one thing that could set Tony off, and she wanted Tony alert, not numb.

It wasn't the amount of time that Loki had been there that specifically worried Natasha. It was that

he was becoming familiar. Loki shouldn't be an everyday sight. The entire team was growing accustomed to seeing Loki, comfortable even, and that meant it was only a matter of time until they trusted the god. That's what made her nervous. She knew better than to trust Loki. Her team was smart, but they didn't all have hearts of steel, and a moment's hesitation, a second of forgiveness, that could be the window of opportunity that Loki needed. For whatever it was that he wanted. And Natasha wasn't about to let that happen.

Tony leaned back against the elevator wall, grateful that he was almost at his floor. Natasha's suspicion was just not something he wanted to deal with right then. He appreciated that she was good at her job. It was an excellent quality for her to have. Just not when it was being used on him. Or Loki, rather, which was just as dangerous.

Maybe he'd put a word in at Shield and get her sent off on some special assignments for a while. Her and Clint.

The doors to his floor opened and he went straight into the bedroom. In the dim light he realized that it'd been a while since he'd slept there. The room was quiet, familiar. The sheets didn't smell like hotel detergent and there were full sized bottles of shampoo in the bathroom. Those were his things on the shelves. He set the whisky down on his bedside table and sat, pulling off his shirt. He kicked his pants onto the floor and laid on top of the sheets in his boxers, staring up at the ceiling. This was nice. Quiet.

He closed his eyes.

When he felt the bed sink down beside him he was not the least bit surprised. He just rolled over, slowly opening his eyes. Two green circlets met his. Facing him from the other pillow, Loki blinked, staring into him in that unsettling, knowing way he had. "You're exhausted," he said simplistically.

Tony closed his eyes, in response, opening them again when he felt Loki's fingers trace down the side of his face. Loki's thumb brushed against Tony's stubble and he grinned. "A day spent driving will do that," Loki said.

"How'd you know about that?" Tony asked.

"I check in on you from time to time, Stark," Loki said. Tony thought to call him out on that but then remembered his own less than honorable security system. He could check in on Loki too, if he wanted to.

"Oh?" Tony said. "Did you enjoy the show?"

"No," Loki said honestly, running his hand down Tony's arm. "I would've preferred your staying here."

"Yeah, well I needed some space to think," Tony said, rolling over onto his back.

"Does that include now?" Loki said, pressed flat to the bed and not moving.

"No," Tony said. "You can stay." He closed his eyes again.

"Stark," Loki said quietly.

"What?"

"It's okay," Loki said.

Tony rolled back onto his side, facing the god. "I know it is," he said defensively. He rolled over onto his back again. "What's gotten into you?" He said, dismissing Loki's reassurance. He tensed, aware that Loki was staring at him again.

"Be silent mortal," Loki commanded. Tony glanced over to see him, face focused and certain. "Sleep," he said. Tony opened his mouth to argue, but before a word could get out Loki spoke. "Sleep, Stark," he said.

"What do I get if I do?" Tony asked, smiling.

"You'll find out in the morning," Loki growled, still staring intently.

"Alright," Tony said, closing his eyes. A good ten minutes passed before he actually started falling asleep. He couldn't tell for sure, but he sensed that Loki was still watching him. He was right, of course. Loki watched over the man until Tony actually did fall asleep before rolling over onto his own back. Sleep did not come easily to Loki that night, but his mind was not an uncomfortable place to be. He was content to lie there beside Tony, lost in his own thoughts, until he fell asleep a few hours later.

Tony awoke with a jolt. Apparently his body had decided that it was time to get up. When was it? He heard soft breathing and rolled over in the bed to see Loki's face beside him, still asleep. Slowly, Tony sat up in the bed, glancing around the room. His phone was on the nightstand beside the glass of whisky. Eight thirty in the morning. Damn. Traveling had really fucked up his sleep schedule. This was unacceptably early.

Loki twitched in his sleep, faintly flexing the hand that was on the pillow beneath his head. Even with his mouth slightly parted, softly breathing, hair twisted around him in graceless bed head, he still managed to have something menacing and dark about him. Tony grinned. He liked that. It was at that moment that he remembered what Loki had said the night before.

He considered waking Loki. The god wasn't any more of a morning person than he was. Still, he *had* promised.

Though, considering it was Loki, that promise could be anything. Tony let himself sit there for a while, imagining what the god had in mind for him.

Well, maybe he could figure that out after a shower. He got out of the bed, gently putting his share of the covers over Loki, and walked softly into the bathroom. Clicking the door closed behind him, he stripped down and stepped into the steaming water. It rushed into his hair, down his back, slipping down his shoulder blades and spine. Sandalwood and bergamot wafted up with the steam as he cracked open bottles of shampoo and body wash, scrubbing at his hair and flesh briskly, bringing himself to full consciousness and leaving the last notes of sleep behind.

He closed his eyes and let the water run over him in a final rinse before leaving the hot water behind and stepping back into the cold bathroom. He toweled off his hair first, combing his fingers through it so that it would dry in a sculpted but wild scruff, the way he wanted. When he had dried off completely it occurred to him that all of his clean clothes were outside of the bathroom.

Well, whatever. He opened the bathroom door and saw that Loki was still asleep. Carefully he walked across the room and pulled open the dresser drawers. Black boxers slipped up over his hips first, followed by a loose pair of jeans and a cotton t-shirt on the small side. The drawer rolled back in place as he slowly pushed it in. His ears pricked as he heard a rustle behind him.

Loki was watching him from the bed, head propped up with an elbow. "I much prefer watching

you do that in reverse," he said with a devious smile.

"Yeah?" Tony said, stepping towards him. "I seem to remember you promising me something for falling asleep last night."

"Well then come here and get your reward," Loki said, deep in his throat with a flicker of a grin. He propped himself up on both elbows, waiting. Tony crossed the space between them. Crawling into the bed with Loki's favorite grin he straddled the god, groaning as he felt those arms wrap around him and pull him in, lips meeting his. The first kiss was shallow and gentle, cool. Warmth sparked between them as lips parted, tongues meeting. He could feel the man's hot breath down inside him, scratching at his lungs. He wrapped his hand around the back of Tony's head, taking control of the kiss, bending the man's head to let him set the pace. Tony moaned, about to say something, his full weight falling into the god who took his time, running his finger nails along the man's fresh shirt, enjoying the way Tony's body arced into him.

When he released the man's mouth Tony smiled back down at him. "Good morning," he whispered, kissing Loki's neck.

"Good morning Tony," Loki said, a half smile on his mouth. He blinked sleepily, then reached for Tony's jeans, hooking a thumb in the belt loops. He stopped.

"What?" Tony asked.

"I said I prefer the reverse," Loki said, gesturing Tony away with his hand. For a moment Tony stared down at him, then grinned again, as though he were doing a favor.

"Alright," Tony said, slowly pulling his shirt off over his head. He rocked his hips down against Loki, smirking at the little "o" that produced in the god's lips. He unzipped the front of his jeans. "If you insist."

"I do," Loki said with conviction.

"Fine," Tony said, sitting up on his knees and pulling the jeans down. "Since you insist," he said, moving aside and pulling them off. He dropped them over the side of the bed. "I mean, if it's important to you," he said, hooking his own thumbs down into the band of his boxers. "Is it?"

"Yes, Stark," Loki said, rolling his eyes.

"I'm sorry, what was that?"

"Did I stutter?" Loki said, pouting his bottom lip condescendingly.

Tony pulled his boxers down just an inch and stopped. "I think you might have."

"Tony," Loki hissed, sitting upright and pulling the man down over him. "You are testing my patience," he said, trailing his lips down Tony's chest and pressing his tongue against the skin. He sucked hard at a little section of skin until he heard Tony whimper lightly above him and pull his boxers down the rest of the way. "Good," Loki said, leaning back.

"You're the one paying a debt," Tony said, finding his way back into Loki's mouth, wet and messy. He kicked the boxers off his legs and pushed hard at the bare body beneath him, mind abandoning him. He moaned with pleasure when he felt those fingers pushing hard into his skin without boundary. Let him.

"I don't suppose you would forgive me," Loki replied, pulling Tony's hand up to his lips and

kissing it. Tony marveled at the oddly intimate gesture, the so-not-his-Loki gesture.

"Not a chance," Tony said. The god released his hands.

"Good," Loki said, shutting his eyes and taking his own fingers into his mouth, sucking on them obscenely. Tony watched the saliva slide down off of them as Loki popped each one out, one at a time, a wet trail dripping from his lips. Hand free, he opened his eyes again and stared at Tony. Just stared at him, that little mischievous half smile tugging at him. Then that slicked hand was around his hard cock and Tony gasped, lurching forward and burying his face in Loki's shoulder to silence the moan peeling out of him. He heard Loki's self-satisfied little laugh and felt that hand tighten and loosen around him, teasing. Sliding down him. Tugging in just the right way. Tony didn't have time to say anything before he was coming, hard and fast, his forehead slumped against Loki's shoulder.

"Not fair," Tony said when his heart stopped pounding in his ears.

"Oh?" Loki said, glaring at Tony.

"Too fast," Tony said, not bothering to move.

"I don't recall time constraints on my promise," Loki said. Tony wanted to wipe that smug grin right off the tricker's face. Loki had other plans. He pushed the mortal off of him, still grinning. He pinned Tony down against the mattress and let his eyes meander over the man's disheveled body, taking in every flush of color and spot of slicked skin. "I think you'll be needing another shower," he said.

"Thanks to you," Tony said, chest rising and falling, still racing.

"Thanks to me," Loki smirked, releasing him. "Go take your shower," he said, rolling over onto the other half of the bed.

"Don't you---"

"Go," Loki said, still grinning. Tony eased back from him, sliding his feet back off the bed without breaking eye contact. "Go," Loki repeated. Tony shook his head, also half smiling. Loki's dark eyes followed him until he was in the bathroom's doorframe.

"Last chance," Tony said.

"For now," Loki said. Tony grabbed the handle, half shutting the door. "Stark," Loki said. Tony opened the door again, watching him, waiting for an invitation. "I am glad you are back."

"Are you," Tony said, a shit eating grin on his face.

"Yes. Now go shower," Loki said, waving him away with his hand, still smirking. Tony shut the door, taking his devilish grin with him. Alone, the memory of the mortal come undone by his own work released him some time later, and when Tony returned he found the bed empty, the air still warm with the scent of satisfaction and lust. Tony changed quickly. The elevator doors opened. He knew if he stayed in the room for too much longer with that bed and those sheets he'd find himself begging at the god's floor.

~~I can't believe I write and post this.~~

shout out to commenters, I appreciate your feedback and this is me trying not to spam
you with thank yous but thank you thank you

enjoy

The Team That We Make

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

"You tell him."

"No, you tell him."

Clint and Natasha had locked eyes across the kitchen table, both resolute.

"Just fucking tell him," Clint said, tilting his head very, very minutely to the side.

"Sure. Right after you tell him," Natasha said, matching the action.

Steve flexed his arms anxiously. He was seated between the two of them, and even if he'd had his shield with him, he was pretty certain it wouldn't have been enough to protect him. "I'll tell him," Steve said.

"You always get stuck with that sort of stuff," Clint said, easing back a little.

"If you're so concerned about Steve, why don't you let him off the hook for once," Natasha said, a tiny smile on her lips.

Clint crossed his arms. "Or you could."

"Or you could," Natasha said.

"I already said I'd do it," Steve said decisively. "Knock it off."

Natasha and Clint both shrugged. "Look what you made him do," Clint said.

"What I made him do---"

"Enough," Steve said, interrupting Natasha.

"Hey, when you tell him, could you say mandatory?" Clint asked.

"Mandatory?" Steve said with confusion. He saw Clint smirk. "Why?" He said more dryly. Clint looked away. "Why?"

Natasha was also smiling. "It's just the way you say it."

"Mandatory," Steve repeated. "This meeting is mandatory." He looked at the two assassins like impish school children. "Do you two want to be around to watch me say it?"

"Fuck yeah," Clint said. Steve rolled his eyes with good nature.

"Alright," Steve said. "Hey, Jarvis."

"Yes Sir," the AI responded.

"I wanted to see his reaction too," Clint muttered with a pout.

"I just said I'd tell him, I didn't say how," Steve told him. "Jarvis," he said again, resuming his

commander's voice, "Tell Tony that there is a resident's meeting tonight at seven pm, and it is *mandatory*."

Clint and Natasha broke into very not-assassin-like giggles that they tried to hide them behind clenched fists. "I said *mandatory*, Jarvis," Steve repeated, a grin on his own face.

Jarvis came back a moment later. "Sir, Mr. Stark would like to point out to you that seven pm on a Friday is a peak social hour, and that anyone with a life will be doing anything other than sleeping through a stuffy meeting."

"Jarvis, would you read the meaning of mandatory to him?"

A few seconds went by as the computer, no doubt, read the definition to Tony. "Mr. Stark would like me to read to you the definition of cruel and unusual punishment. It is a situation in which the--"

"Enough Jarvis," Steve said. He rubbed at his neck. "Tell him it's serious."

Clint glanced over at him. "I don't know if I'd call it exactly serious," he said. Steve shrugged.

"Mr. Stark will begrudgingly be in attendance," Jarvis said.

Steve shook his head. "Took long enough." He sat back in his chair. "Alright, since I got that taken care of, you two can make the rest of the arrangements."

"I get Banner," Natasha said quickly.

"Then I get Thor," Clint said. They had dangerously locked eyes again.

"I get Pepper," they both said.

"I get Pep---"

"No," Steve said, cutting them off. "I'm going to toss a coin. Clint, you're heads. Natasha, you're tails. Whoever gets it gets to choose." He took a quarter out of his back pocket. "Ready?" He could feel their eyes trained on him, and was grateful it wasn't something he experienced more often. The coin shot up.

"Tails," Steve said, catching it.

"I get Pepper," Natasha said with a broad smile.

"Son of a bitch," Clint swore. "Cap, you take Loki. He seems to like you anyways."

"No," Steve said, smiling. "I think it would be a good team building experience for you to tell him." Clint let out an exasperated sigh. "And that's mandatory."

"That's mandatory," Clint mocked him. "Fine," he said. "Jarvis."

"In person," Steve said. "Never mind, Jarvis."

"That's not fair," Clint said. "You got to---"

"---team building," Steve said.

"So what, I'm just supposed to go onto that psychopath's floor and be like 'hey, you have to come

hang out with us?"

"Something like that," Steve said. From the corner of his eye he could see Natasha's face narrowing into an expression he knew very well by then. "Loki's not going to try anything," he said assuredly to her. "It wouldn't be his style."

"Right, he'd probably murder me with a team of back up dancers and confetti," Clint said. "Well, if you're down one Avenger, I just want you to know that my ghost *will* be haunting you."

"You don't believe in ghosts," Steve said.

"I can start," Clint said, getting up from the table. "I'm going to go get this over with."

"It'll be fine," Steve said once Clint had left. "Loki's been here for over two months now. If he wanted one of us dead, it would have happened."

"Loki's not above taking his time," Natasha said. "Two months is probably like two minutes for him."

Steve was quiet for a while, considering. "I'm not saying that he's completely changed, or that he's ready to fight for our side, but you have to admit Natasha, the guy walking around here is not the same guy that was yelling for people to kneel to him in Germany."

"You're right about that," Natasha said slowly. "But he's still the same guy that killed hundreds of people and brainwashed Clint and tore New York to shreds and I don't trust him."

"With all due respect," Steve said calmly, making direct eye contact with her, "you've said yourself that your hands aren't clean either. Why can't we give him that same chance?"

Natasha looked into his honest, confident eyes. She was almost jealous of him, for being able to do that still, after all. There was no antagonism in the stare she returned. Steve wasn't like her or Clint, but in a way, she was grateful for that. They needed people like Steve and Bruce. It kept the team balanced. Her lips flinched. "I won't let down my guard," she said. "I think Loki's just really off his M.O., for reasons unknown. But," she said, "I can respect second chances." She frowned. That sounded like something the captain would say.

"I think we all can," Steve said. He got up for another cup of coffee. "Refill?" He asked.

"Please," she said, sliding her mug towards him.

Clint tapped his foot anxiously, stretching his arms back and forth. In his mind he ran through choke hold scenarios, knock out punches, then lethal ones. Though he had his shit under control in a group setting, one on one was different. He could practically taste the adrenaline knocking through his every cell.

"Loki," he barked as soon as the doors slid open. "Holy shit," Clint said more quietly, stepping out onto the floor. He hadn't seen Loki's remodeled floor in person, though he had heard about it from Bruce. Scanning the room, he saw no one. "Jarvis, where is the bastard?"

"I am programmed to recognize several people under the title bastard," the AI said pleasantly. "To which do you refer?"

"Am I on that list?" Clint asked.

"Not currently, Sir."

"Was I in the past?"

"You may have briefly been following the lab incident, sir."

"I thought that was a microwave," Clint said in his defense. The AI had no reply for him. Clint supposed that was for the best. He couldn't really blame Tony for programming that in. Clint had broken a very expensive whatever-it-was in the lab. He hadn't figured it out before it exploded and Tony came in, crying about dismantling his baby. "Where is Loki?"

"On his floor, sir." Clint scanned the room, still finding it empty. This was bad. Was Loki just concealed from sight, or was he behind one of the adjacent doors, or was it one of the hundred horrible scenarios that Clint's mind was coming up with?

"Hey," Clint shouted, taking a couple steps back towards the elevator doors. Maybe it was best to bail.

The handle on the furthest side door clicked. Clint tensed. Loki's head appeared around the door, but he kept his body concealed behind the barely ajar door. "Agent Barton," he said, his eyes flicking upwards in annoyance, "what do you need?"

"I've got a message for you," he said, noticing that Loki looked more strung out and messy than refined and composed. Then he tried not noticing that. He really didn't want to know. "Residents meeting at seven tonight. Be there."

"Your technology is capable of delivering messages, is it not?" Loki said, eyes dark and catlike behind the door.

"Hey, I don't want to be here anymore than you want me here," Clint said, slamming his flat palm into the elevator down key. "Just fucking show up."

"Of course," Loki said, still watching him. Clint could feel the hairs on the back of his neck stand up. Mercifully, the doors behind him opened and he stepped backwards into them, not breaking eye contact.

"Great," Clint said, hitting the door close button. He saw Loki disappear behind the far side door again and made up his mind to deliver his message to Thor as quickly as possible so that he could tell Natasha about his visit to Loki's floor. At the very least, she'd have something scathing and amusing to say about it.

"The ceiling's the impressive part," Natasha said as he recounted it to her later in the tower's common room. "How many crystal rods do you think there are? 100? 1000?"

"When did you see it?" Clint asked, his face scrunching with displeasure.

"I've monitored it," Natasha said calmly. "Jarvis has it programmed in to surveillance."

"And you haven't told me? There's got to be something good on that footage. What is it?"

Natasha's mouth panned out into a dull, thin line as she considered. "It's boring, actually. He really does just sit there and read." She brushed her hair back from her face. "From what I've been able to tell anyway."

"Nat. He looked like he'd been in a sauna." Clint didn't want to elaborate on it, but he couldn't stop himself from pointing it out either. Natasha just smirked.

"Haven't seen any of that on the footage," she said.

"Jarvis, put up the feed from Loki's room," Clint said, turning his attention towards the room's television. It automatically flipped over to a static shot of Loki's floor. In the far corner the god was draped across one of his chairs, reading. For a while Clint watched, though nothing was happening. "Jarvis, display archive of footage." A list of dates and recordings appeared on screen in illuminated blue text. Clint picked one and had the AI play it out for them. It was just Loki walking across the room, poking at the enchanted fire, watering the plant on his coffee table, rearranging things on shelves. "Fast forward," Clint said. The footage sped up, going through similar nothingness for another two minutes before cutting off.

"End of record," Jarvis said.

"They're all like that," Natasha said.

"What gives," said Clint. "No one is that... normal. Especially not Loki. Jarvis, why isn't the whole day recorded?"

"Footage is evaluated for significance hourly, reduced, and archived accordingly."

"That was disappointing," Clint said.

"Yeah, I know," Natasha said.

Upstairs Tony got a notification from Jarvis that Loki's surveillance record had been accessed. He was accustomed to Natasha checking the footage, but Clint's access to it was new. Tony pulled up the footage from the common room and listened in on their conversation. Not life threatening, he decided. Jarvis had been manipulating surveillance records since Loki's arrival, narrowing footage down and saving only the dullest.

Clint would blow off his encounter with Loki as a quirk. Well, he would revel in it for a while and then let it go when the fun had worn out. Tony turned his attention back to the blue prints he was working on. Unless something was amiss, he rarely checked the surveillance footage. It felt too Orwellian for him. Most of the time.

A while later Jarvis alerted him again. This time it was because the meeting was starting in seven minutes.

"This doesn't look serious to me," Tony announced as he walked in.

"Oh, it's very serious," Natasha said from over a stack of Pictionary cards. The cards in her hands thrummed together with dull thuds as she shuffled them. Clint was seated on the sofa beside her, glaring at Loki, who was stiffly hunched against the back of one of the common room arm chairs. Beside him was Thor in another arm chair, who was in the middle of a conversation with Bruce. Against an easel in the front of the room there was a large pad of paper. On one side stood Pepper, and the other, Steve. Tony decided to take the chair closest to the door. He did not like what he saw.

"Now that we're all here," Steve said, pointedly looking at a mildly late Tony, "we can begin." He chopped his arm down the middle of the group. "Loki, Thor, Pepper, and Bruce, you're team A.

Tony, Natasha, Clint, and I are team B. In this team building activity, you will be given a card with a word. Without speaking you must draw that word on the paper. If your team guesses the word in the thirty seconds given, a point will be awarded."

"Uh, teach? How exactly are stick figures going to team build?" Tony said, raising his hand half way.

"Cooperation," Steve said without nonsense. He handed a fat sharpie to Pepper. "Your team may go first."

Natasha held out the deck, allowing Pepper to choose a card. In an unbuttoned white oxford and cotton tank top, the curl of loose blond hair that fell over her shoulder as she picked a card gave her the ease of summer. She looked happy today. Her eyes flicked down at the card briefly before she said "start."

A scattering of long wavy black lines flew across the page with the squeaking marker.

"Bacon," Bruce said.

"Snakes," Thor said.

She drew a sun above the lines. It was water, ocean, lake, something like that. Had to be, Tony thought.

"River," Loki said.

"Right," Pepper smiled.

"Time," Jarvis announced.

"Team A one point," Steve said. He stood up, taking the marker from Pepper. Bruce took the stack of cards and held them out for Steve to choose. "Start," Steve said, reading his card.

Gesture lines crossed the paper, swiftly followed by a pair of wings and a beak. Then tiny, hasty little lines began to fill in the spaces.

"Are you seriously shading that," Tony said. "Bird. It's bird. A shaded bird."

"Right," Steve said. Jarvis called the time a few seconds later.

It was Thor's turn.

"Box." "House." "Car." "Milk carton!" Pepper and Bruce's voices rang out in succession.

"It's a television," Loki announced dryly just as Jarvis called time. Steve gave them the point. Tony got the marker.

"An ant," Clint said, staring at the single dot Tony had made.

"Two ants," Natasha offered.

"Ants trapped in a circle," Steve said.

Tony hit his head against the paper. He crossed out the previous drawing and tried again.

"A sewer," Clint said.

"Time," Jarvis said.

"It was cheese," Tony said. "Come on. Swiss cheese?" His three team mates made no effort to contain their amusement. "I'll try shading it for you next time."

"Yeah, that'll help," Clint teased him.

Bruce stood up to draw.

"Kettle," Pepper said not three seconds later.

Their team was slaughtering Tony's. Pepper and Loki were especially good at guessing, though Bruce wasn't far off from them. Thor struggled with some of the words, though no one really blamed him for not knowing "gingerbread man" (still, they couldn't figure out how Loki *could* guess that). In fact, the four of them were making a really good team. Natasha and Clint were a little better at guessing each other's words, but it wasn't enough to close the gap.

It was Pepper's turn to draw again.

"Pie." "Cake." Bruce and Thor tried.

"Bicycle," Loki said.

"Perfect," Pepper said, sitting back down next to him. "I think we're going to win," she said to Loki.

"Oh, I think we are," he grinned back at her.

Neither of them looked over to see Tony noticing the camaraderie suspiciously.

"Tent." "Grass." "Tree."

"It's a whisk," Clint said when Jarvis called time.

"That was a hard one," Natasha conceded. Loki took the pen.

He looked at the card, and this time a puckish smirk curled his lips. When the sharpie hit the page it hit the page with magic, sending the ink out in a vortex of spiraling lines that crawled out into the white spaces, leaving an ornate drawing in their place.

"Peasant," Bruce, Pepper, and Thor said together. Loki nodded.

"Uh, yeah, cheating much?" Tony said. Steve nodded.

"Not cool," Clint said.

"It is not as if you were going to catch up with us," Loki said matter-of-factly.

"You have to admit he has a point," Bruce said. He stood up. "I'm going to grab some drinks." No one argued with him on that, though their conversation turned back over to how mismatched the teams had been, or if they were mismatched at all. Pepper got up halfway to help Bruce carry a tray of glasses and several brightly colored bottles.

Alcohol. Finally, Tony thought, pouring himself a glass.

"Did I ever tell you guys about the time I stabbed a lion?" Clint said twenty minutes later.

"You have never stabbed a lion," Natasha said, far less inebriated than he was.

"Yes I DID," Clint insisted.

"Let the man with hawk eyes tell his story," Thor said. He had found a bottle of Everclear.

"It was in the streets of NEW York," Clint slurred. "I just saw this beast," he said, waving his arms out, "trotting down the ROAD. Broad daylight. I didn't even think about it. I was just like, LION. DOWN." He motioned his fist with a small stab.

"I cannot believe this," Natasha mumbled, looking away.

"I said, LION DOWN," Clint repeated, grinning self-indulgently.

"You made your ancestors proud," Thor assured him.

"I did," Clint said, toasting to himself.

"Did I tell you about the time I got frozen in a block of ice?" Steve said. He ignored Clint groaning in protest. Here came the war stories.

It was quite a while later that Tony noticed Loki's eyelids fluttering, his eyes rolling back. Tony looked down at the glass beside the god. It was possible, sure, but likely? No. Tony's head was spinning. He wasn't sure that he could get himself back to his room, let alone the god.

Pepper was noticing too. She glanced over at Tony. Something wordless flickered between them. "Nat," Pepper said quietly. She nodded her head towards Clint. "Maybe we should call it a night."

"I was thinking the same thing," Natasha said. She slipped Clint's arm against her shoulders, forcing him to stand up with her. "Let's go," she said. Clint giggled and mumbled something as she guided him towards the elevator. "What a party," she said dryly.

Steve shook his head. "I liked his lion story," he said.

"Yeah. Me too," Bruce said. "We'll have to do this more often." He looked over at Tony. "Your turn," he said.

"What, no, I'm fine," Tony protested.

"I'm not leaving you down here," Bruce said. He crossed his arms. "Get up or the other guy's going to escort your drunk self upstairs." Tony did stand, and he faltered as he did. "Come on," Bruce said.

"Let me," Steve said. He wanted to help Bruce.

Pepper glanced, surreptitiously, she hoped, at Loki. His eyes were mostly closed now, his head rocking slightly. On a better day, he might've reminded her of a sleepy kitten video. "You did a horrible thing," she heard Thor saying to him. Oh no, not time for this. Suddenly she felt so small. She was playing with fire.

Pepper took in a deep breath and then put on her best smile. "Thor," she said, "Go upstairs."

He stood. He was drunk, but listening. "Go upstairs," she said.

"As you wish," he said amiably.

She felt slightly relieved when he was gone in the elevator. The moment he was gone though, she was terrified. So was Tony. Upstairs, Jarvis was alerting him that Loki and Pepper were alone on the same floor, and setting off an alarm. Steve had already left, and Bruce was just about to.

"I'll go downstairs and make sure everything is alright," he said. "Just stay here."

"No, I'll come," Tony said.

"It took two people to get you up here," Bruce said. "It'll be fine, just stay here." He closed Tony's bedroom door with a loud thud. Behind him Tony stumbled out of bed, tripping over the sheets.

"Loki," Pepper said cautiously, inching closer to him. "Are you okay?"

"No, you insipid---" he lost his words.

"Hey, we need to get you back upstairs. Do you think we can do that?"

His eyes fluttered back and forth again, his head tilting to the side. "Magic no," he said.

Pepper sighed. She'd had one glass that evening. She thought she'd have been the one helping Tony upstairs. "I'm going to take your hand and you are going to follow me, okay? And not try anything," she added.

Loki made to stand up but fell back in the chair. Shit. Maybe she should just let him sleep it off there.

"Don't help me," Loki said in a whispery snarl. "Why would you?"

"You're important to Tony, and Tony is important to me," she said. "And I want to give Tony the chance to figure this thing out."

Loki tried to sit up straight. His eyes wouldn't let him focus on her. He laughed then, a broken laugh with his head hung back, his adam's apple bobbing in his throat. "What?" She said.

"Are we going to continue this game?" He asked.

"Depends. Are you going to give up?"

"Never."

"Then I guess we're still playing," she said.

He tried focusing his eyes on her again, smiling. "Good," he said.

"I like playing against you," he said quietly.

"We both think we're going to win, don't we?" She said.

"Know," Loki corrected her. "I should give you a head start though. You're pitifully disadvantaged," he said, closing his eyes.

"So are you," Pepper said.

Loki chuckled, low, with tired amusement. Pepper did too, tension broken, quietly. The two grinned at one another. As best they could, under the circumstances. Loki let his head fall against the back of the chair.

"Is everything okay?" Bruce said, walking in.

"We have to find a way to move him," Pepper said. Bruce frowned and came over. The two of them tried helping Loki out of the chair, but with his height and state it was difficult. They put him back down. Just then Tony stumbled out of the elevator.

"Your girlfriend's fine, would you please stay where you are? You're going to give yourself a concussion," Bruce snapped. "Right. Well. Loki can sleep it off down here. Let's just get you and Tony back."

"No, he's not throwing up in my living room," Tony said in a panic.

"Get in the elevator," Bruce said impatiently.

"Here," Pepper said, pushing at the back of the chair. It budged. Bruce got behind the chair and began pushing.

"Don't get any ideas," Bruce warned Tony. "Get back in that elevator."

Ten minutes later they had Loki, Tony, and the chair inside. Bruce and Pepper pushed Loki onto his own floor in the chair. He had already fallen asleep. Tony started to blabber something about Loki's chest when he felt Pepper's elbow in his ribs. In the morning he would be grateful. For the second time Bruce guided him to his bed, with Pepper helping. She didn't stay. Tony was already falling asleep.

"I'm not doing that again," Bruce said when they were back in the elevator.

"Me either," Pepper replied.

Bruce smiled for the first time in a while. "Did you know that Tony programmed Jarvis to warn him if Loki was alone on the same floor as you?"

"No," Pepper said. Her heart jumped in her chest. Did that mean he knew that she'd been to Loki's floor? To threaten the god, of course, but still. Tony didn't know that she and Loki had openly discussed, well, him.

"It's kind of cute," Bruce said.

"Yeah," Pepper said. "Kind of."

Drops of blue, with rings of purple and gold inside them, covered the ground. If it was ground. It was, wasn't it? He wasn't sure. With a laugh he laid down against it, finding the surface light and springy, though something boxy was around the edge of it. Loki laughed. Then the dream scape around him was changing, morphing into something...Midgardian. But demented, somehow.

Now he was on a white couch with a carpeted office floor, but the ceiling above him was open to a black expanse of nothingness, with brightly colored things floating through it. What were they?

"The fuck's that?" Tony asked, beside him.

"Tony," Loki said.

"Loki," Tony said.

They both cracked up. Then they *really* cracked, their laughter ricocheting off one another, tearing at their sides, refusing to subside. Crying with laughter, it was Loki that escaped first. "I'm stuck in that chair," he said, wiping away a tear. "I can feel it in my side."

"I can't believe they---" Tony started laughing again. He was lying on the floor, holding onto his sides.

"It's probably for the best," Loki said. "You," he said, smirking, "were so, so close to acknowledging my beauty in front of Banner."

Tony rolled his eyes. "Hopefully not in those words." He squinted up at the not-ceiling above. "Never met you in a drunk dream before."

"Enjoy it," Loki said. "I am surprised myself."

"Do you get hangovers?"

"Yes," Loki said with annoyance. "It's not that we can't get drunk, it's that your Midgardian water is laughable by our standards."

"Loki, babe, I think you know that wasn't water."

"I know well it wasn't, Stark," the god threw back at him. Tony grinned.

They laid there together, hazily watching the illuminations of color above them. "I'm not going to believe this happened in the morning," Tony said at last, closing his eyes. "Actually, yes I am."

"Tell me about it in the morning," Loki said, drifting out of the dream scape and back into ordinary sleep.

Chapter End Notes

some nonsense for all the angst

Something That Did Belong to Me

Loki awoke in the chair, slumped down into the boxy arms of it, a stubborn, demanding pain in his side. He sat up just enough to lean his head back over the side again and closed his eyes.

It was no use. He was awake. Beyond him, the sun was well above the city streets, helping itself into his living room. It stabbed at his eyes, demanding that he awake. Stretching, he slumped back over the side of the chair for a moment longer. Then he helped himself to a brief shower, though the Midgardian fixtures weren't much to his liking.

"Morning," he thought he heard. He looked around the room, but it was empty. Sitting down in the chair again, he rubbed at his temples. Tony was somewhere upstairs, not calling him. Maybe he needed to sleep again. Then last night's dream came back to him. A smile cracked through his tired features. He wondered what Tony thought about that dream.

Getting up, he vanished into the room above. Glancing around, he found it empty. The sheets were rumpled and unmade, the bed was cold. Loki sat down. "Jarvis," he called, "where is Tony?"

"Out in the field, Sir. The Avengers were dispatched a few hours ago."

"Where?"

"I am not allowed to disclose that information."

"And why not?" The AI did not answer. "When will he be back?" Again the room was silent. Loki laid all the way down against the bed. "I could strip your parts little machine, I could make you beg and plead for my mercy---"

"I do not feel pain," Jarvis chirped. Loki grinned and rolled over. Jarvis had a point. A headache was knocking in his head. Closing his eyes, Loki mercifully drifted back off to sleep.

The sound of heavy, labored breathing woke him back up. "Tony?" He asked, his vision coming back into focus. Tony was standing beside the bed, his face marred by congealed blood across the bridge of his nose. "What happened?"

"Just a minor miscalculation," Tony smiled, though the mirth melted right off of his face. "I was actually just going to pass out," he said. Wordlessly, Loki lifted his hand up to Tony's bruising skin, brushing his fingers over the surface, leaving natural skin in their wake. "Wow," Tony said a minute later, lifting his hand up to his nose. "You---" He paused. "You should really do that for Barton or Romanov. They really got the worst of it today. Clint's got three cracked ribs and---" Tony stopped when he saw that Loki was looking away from him, coldly surveying the things in the room again.

"I am not here to play Avenger's medic," Loki said.

"Would it kill you to make a little bit of an effort," Tony said, exhausted from the night before and the morning's missions. "Maybe if they learned to trust you, then someday you could---" Tony shook his head. One hand brushed through his scraggly helmet hair as he frowned. "Move over," he commanded.

"Someday I could what," Loki demanded.

"Move," Tony said, eyebrows knitted together harshly. He sat down in the little space that was

allowed and let himself collapse into the bed.

"Someday I could what, Stark," Loki said in a snarled whisper.

Tony rolled over just to stare Loki down humorlessly. Then he rolled back to his other side.

"Tell me," Loki said.

"Either let me sleep or go downstairs and earn yourself some brownie points," Tony said, not moving. He felt Loki sit up in the bed. "Try and be nice," he said.

"I am not nice," Loki said derisively.

"I didn't say go and save the world," Tony said, "because I just saved it," he added, only half joking. "I said to go and be nice. If I wake up and find that Clint has something nice to say about you, well, maybe it'll pay off for you."

If Tony had been facing Loki, he would've seen the Asgardian's head tilt ever so slightly to the side, calculating the offer. "Oh?" He said quietly. "I would enjoy having you in my debt."

"Wouldn't you," Tony said. He felt Loki slide off the bed. "And be nice about it," Tony said. Rather than vanish, the god walked out of the room, taking the elevator. Tony smiled to himself when he heard the doors close.

Clint looked up from his bed, heart racing. In the elevator was Loki, glowering. "You're not allowed on this floor," Clint said, his voice wavering between anxiety and warning.

"I'm in the elevator," Loki said calmly. "I am aware that you have an injury," he said.

Clint did not say anything. Loki crossed his arms and wetted his lips with his tongue, frowning uncomfortably. "Let me be of assistance," he said begrudgingly.

"If you try one fucking thing," Clint said, glaring, "I will kill you."

"You may believe that is possible if the thought comforts you," Loki said, walking out and towards him. Clint tensed. Taking in a breath and letting it go, Loki reached his hand out to the man. Resting his hand on Clint's arm, he let his magic twist through the mortal's body, repairing what was broken. When he looked up, Clint was looking at him with an odd expression.

"Thanks," Clint said, pulling his arm away. Loki turned and left, saying nothing. As he walked away, Clint watched him, feeling the newly unbroken ribs.

Loki leaned back against the elevator wall. He would charge Tony outlandishly for that. The thought of the mortal's new debt to him was intriguing, but it didn't completely erase the sour taste in his mouth. "Nice" did not become him. Well, Loki thought, reassuring himself, thinking of the Midgardian phrase, no good deed goes unpunished.

Things That We Did Together

"You can sit back down, Rogers," Clint said, staring down the captain, who was already half way out of his chair. "I'm fine."

"Sure," Steve said. "If you can explain why you think you can be up walking. What did I tell you last time about taking care of yourself? You can't do this 'I'm fine' thing---"

Clint had lifted up his shirt, revealing the skin beneath it. Aside from old scars, his skin was unmarked, nothing like the marble of purple and blue that it had been that morning. Steve's jaw dropped. Shrugging, Clint pulled his shirt back down and returned to raiding the fridge. "How is that possible?" Steve asked.

With a bottled sports drink in one hand Clint shut the refrigerator with his shoulder. He shrugged. "Good question," he said, sitting down at the table beside Steve. "I was lying in bed when Loki strolled in. Patched up my shit and left without a word." He cracked the plastic cap and took a drink. "He didn't seem too happy about it." He took another drink. "Why are you smiling?"

"Progress," Steve said confidently.

Clint rolled his eyes. "He carved an eyeball out of a guy's face. Don't tell me he's going soft."

"And how's that side feel?" Steve said. Clint frowned. "He's making baby steps. Come on Clint, you have to admit that he's made some progress. He's probably just not good at the whole giving kindness thing."

"I think he's not good at the whole kindness thing," Clint said. "But," he said, "He did just make my life a whole lot easier. That would've taken weeks to heal."

Steve was quiet, thinking. He stood up from the table. "Where are you going?" Clint asked.

"I'll catch up with you later," he said. Certain that he knew the answer, Clint shook his head. He wasn't getting involved.

As Clint had suspected, Steve made his way to Loki's floor.

"Hello," he called, stepping out onto the rug. Loki glanced up from his chair at the captain. He nodded his head. Steve walked over to him and took the chair across from him. "That was a nice thing that you did for Clint," Steve said.

Aside from a blink, Loki's face did not move.

"Clint's not the only one that appreciates it," Steve said. "He's stubborn, but I think he'd thank you himself if you came downstairs."

"I don't need his gratitude," Loki said coldly.

As though to a child, Steve smiled reassuringly. "The whole team appreciates it. Me, Clint," he said, "Thor." He let the name hang in the air.

"I just felt sorry for the ineptitude of your Midgardian healing arts."

"Right," Steve said. "Well," he stood again. "I'm making dinner for the team tonight if you want to drop by." He stared Loki down a while longer before turning his back to leave, that peculiar brand

of assurance on his face. If only the captain knew better, Loki thought.

"Do I want to know what you did?" Clint said as Steve walked in. The archer had not left the table in the meantime.

Steve opened a cabinet. "I invited him to dinner," he said casually.

"What are you making?"

"I was thinking chicken and vegetables," Steve said. Clint frowned and then stood up. He walked up beside Steve and opened up a drawer, pulling out some utensils.

"Let's not put fucking garlic in it this time," he said.

A while later Jarvis was calling up to the rooms, inviting each Avenger downstairs. A familiar head of red hair came into the room a couple minutes later. "Nat, let me get that," Clint said, rushing over alongside her and pulling out a chair for her to sit in. She punched his shoulder without a word. "Be careful," he chided her.

"I can handle a broken collar bone," she said, sitting down, gingerly avoiding the back of the chair. She had a figure eight splint that wrapped around her back and over her shoulders. Natasha glared at Clint pointedly. "I'm fine."

"Okay, just let me do things," he said, setting down a plate that he'd already made for her.

"If you try to feed this to me Barton," she said, grabbing her fork and gesturing with it in her fist, "I will kill you."

He sat down next to her. "Not in that splint, you won't."

"Is that a challenge?"

"No," Clint said, standing back up. "What do you want to drink?"

"We can't all have demi-god nurses," she said, ignoring him and standing up. He cut off the path between her and the cabinet with glasses in it. She grabbed a soda can out of the fridge instead. "How's that working out?" She said, eyebrows raising up.

"Fine," Clint said, watching her sit down out of the corner of his eye with anxiety. He knew she was fine, but still. Besides, he felt a little guilty that his injuries had been healed away and not hers.

He settled back down into the chair beside her again. In the meantime Bruce and Thor had come in and were making their way over to the table as well, sitting down alongside Steve. Clint was fighting with Natasha (and losing) about cutting her chicken for her when Loki walked in, helped himself, and sat down without comment. He was across from the archer, who unabashedly stared at him, still holding Natasha's cutlery in his hands.

"Are you enchanted by my physical being or are your eyes stuck in your head Agent Barton," Loki said dryly, not looking up from his plate.

Clint set down the cutlery. Natasha took the opportunity to begin furiously cutting the chicken herself, listening intently for what Clint would say. A moment later her opportunity left as Clint saw her half cut chicken and made to grab the knife from her hands. She yanked her wrist aside, pointing the sharp edge towards him. The look in her eyes kept his hands where they were. He turned his attention back over to Loki. "Thanks man," he said quietly.

Loki had been watching the interaction between the two spies intently. He looked down at her half cut chicken and the knife edge pointed out toward Clint. Without answering Clint, he reached his hand out towards Natasha.

Bewilderingly, his fingers made contact with her arm. Her trained stare locked onto him, her entire body going rigid. She felt magic flooding into her body, sucking bruises out of existence, fusing bone back together, brushing away the pain of a thousand needy nerves.

It seemed like an eternity to Clint before the two separated. In reality, it was only a few seconds. Natasha reached around her back with the knife and freed the splint, letting it drop onto the floor. She flexed her arms, stretching them up towards the ceiling. She glanced sideways over at Loki. "Thanks," she said. Loki's attention had been focused on Clint.

He shrugged. "It's simple for me," he muttered, directing his attention back onto the plate in front of him.

Natasha resumed her cutting, grinning subtly at the corner of her mouth. "Clint," she said, "you can stop staring at me."

"His eyes seem to be stuck this evening," Loki said. Openly amused, Natasha smiled wide. Loki returned the expression.

"Whatever," Clint said, quieted.

Natasha reached over and patted Clint's arm, even more amused by his being flustered. He didn't move. She took her hand away as though nothing had happened, knowing that he'd have brushed the whole dinner off by the end of the night. "So," she said to Loki, "maybe you should teach Bruce how to do that."

"I can't teach him how," Loki said. "It's not something that your realm is capable of."

"Why not?" Clint said.

Loki lifted two of his fingers up, level with his eyes. Then he snapped them. A tiny red spark fell down from them, vanishing before it hit the table. "Try," he said.

Clint mimicked the motion, but nothing happened. Natasha tried as well. "See?" Loki said.

"What are you doing?" Steve asked. The other side of the table had left their own conversation behind when they noticed what was happening.

"Not teaching us magic," Clint said. "Why doesn't it work for us?"

Loki didn't answer.

"It's a different sort of science," Thor said, trailing off.

"Does Jane know how it works?" Bruce asked. He'd had several conversations with Jane, and knew that she'd decoded other useful information from the Asgardian.

"Not Loki's magic," Thor said. His brother smirked at that.

"I bet Tony could figure it out," Clint said casually, picking up his fork again. He didn't notice the flicker of pride and intrigue in the being across the table from him. "Are you gonna finish that Nat?"

"Yeah, I need my strength," she said sarcastically.

"You can have mine if you wish Barton," Loki said, pushing his plate towards the man. Clint's nose wrinkled.

"I'm alright."

"No, I think you need your strength," Natasha teased him.

"She's right," Loki said.

Clint turned to start talking to Steve instead, but the captain was in the middle of telling Thor about some sort of military exercise. Clint feigned interest. "What a baby," Natasha said. She glanced over at Loki. "You're not expecting anything other than a 'thank you' for this," she said, tapping her collarbone clinically, "Are you?"

"No," Loki said. Not from her, at least. Tony was another matter. "I'm not."

"Good," Natasha said. "Wanna disclose why you did it?"

"Like I said," Loki told her, "I just pitied your poor medical advancements."

"Right," Natasha said. "Is that all?"

"Indeed it is, Agent Romanov."

"Hmm," was all she said in reply.

Loki let out a breath he did not realize that he'd been holding in. These mortals were needlessly grateful for simple things. He had been sincere---he did find their fragile nature pitiable. Not that he wanted to be thanked for remedying it. "May I ask how you got those injuries?"

Natasha answered with boredom. "Mine was from a fall. Clint's was from the fight."

"Where were you?"

"Oh," Natasha said, "somewhere Midwestern. It's always something." She sighed. "It was pretty boring as far as Avengers assignments go. Why? Did you miss us?"

"Terribly," Loki said.

"Did you miss Clint more?" Natasha said, her eyebrows rising up. She sensed Clint's attention focus back on her at his name, although he pretended that he was still engrossed in the captain's conversation.

"No," Loki replied.

"So you missed me more?"

Loki knew her intentions were on teasing Clint. He obliged. He enjoyed the archer's flustered behavior as much as she did. "Of course."

"No you didn't," Clint said out of the side of his mouth, still not looking over.

"You're right. I missed you more," Loki said. Now he had Clint's attention. "I just lounged around my room all day, wondering when Agent Barton was coming back."

"That'd be more interesting than your usual M.O.," Clint said.

"M.O.," Loki repeated.

"Your style of doing things," Clint said. "You do just lay around that room all day, don't you?"

"Yes. Thinking about you," Loki said.

"Creep," Clint said. Loki was unfazed. In fact, he laughed. The sound struck silence in the room for a beat.

"Creep," Clint repeated when the others had started talking again.

"If it bothers you so much, why don't you invite me along with you next time?"

"Yeah," Clint said. "Like I'd let you come along on a SHIELD mission. They'd love to see you."

"That's what I thought," Loki said. "Though I'd rather be the one in charge, I am an excellent leader."

Clint scoffed. "No one here is kneeling."

"That is a shame," Loki said, not antagonistically.

Clint grinned. "Keep telling yourself that," he said.

Natasha folded her arms across her chest. Was that the missing piece? Did Loki intend to lead the team? If so, he was certainly taking his time getting there.

Loki bit back on reminding Clint that the man had once been under his leadership. He knew bringing that up wouldn't endear the man at all, regardless of what a snappy retort it would make.

The others were getting up now, putting their empty plates away. "Hey," Steve said, standing beside the three of them. "Thanks for coming down to join us."

"It was nothing," Loki said. Steve smiled again, turning around. He said something to Thor when he was further away, too low for Loki to hear. Thor looked back over towards them and back to Steve again, who repeated something.

"Hey," Clint was saying. "Nat and I are leaving, so try not to miss me too much, alright?"

"Impossible," Loki threw back at him, shrugging. Clint had wrapped his arm around the back of Natasha's shoulders. She stepped out from underneath him. Loki found it deeply amusing that Barton felt threatened. Natasha only found it irritating.

"Come on," she said, pulling Clint away. "I can't stand looking at you two love birds any more."

"We're just kidding," Clint said. "Aren't we?"

"I am," Natasha said. Loki shook his head.

"Kidding," Clint said. "We're kidding."

"Oh, I don't know, Barton." Loki winked at the man. Clint's eyes widened.

Natasha and Loki both began laughing.

"Alright, very funny you two," Clint said, walking into the elevator. "Very funny."

"Hey," Natasha said, stepping into the elevator beside him. When the doors closed she took his hand in hers. "You know better," she said quietly.

"I do," he said, kissing her on top of her head. "Anyway," he whispered. "The psycho's just made it possible for us to have a better night."

"Elaborate," she whispered back. He leaned down, twisting his words into hot, breathy descriptions of what they'd do when the doors opened to his floor. Her head felt lighter, dizzy, with each vivid imagining. She gripped his hand, impatient for the doors to open.

Downstairs, plates rattled as washed dishes mundanely found their way back into cupboards and drawers.

Thoughts That I Wanted to Hold On to

Tony had slept through dinner, through the early hours of the night, and was waking up early. Jarvis informed him that it was five in the morning. Stretching, Tony pulled himself out of bed, unable to add anymore to the fourteen hours of sleep that he'd accumulated. Despite Loki's healing, the battle had worn him down.

Making his way to the kitchen, Tony brewed a pot of coffee and sat down at the table. It wasn't long before Steve came through in his usual routine.

"Hey there," Steve said, mildly surprised. "Didn't expect to see you up."

"Yeah," Tony said, "Unfortunately there's a limit to how much I can sleep."

"Hmm," Steve said, taking a mug out of the cabinet. He was silent as he poured the coffee.

In the daze of the early hours, both men were placated and calm. Steve, because the familiar ease of his morning workouts always kept him in a good frame of mind, and Tony because he had slept so long and wasn't about to argue with anyone.

It was without the usual recent tension between them that they spoke then, Steve beginning. "You missed out on dinner last night. Loki healed Clint and Natasha."

"That's odd," Tony said, steeling his face against the celebratory grin he wanted. "How'd that happen?"

"He dropped by Clint's room and then healed Natasha when he came down for dinner."

"He came by for dinner?"

"Yeah," Steve said, a tiny note of pride flitting across his answer. "I invited him down."

"Oh," Tony said.

"Jarvis said you were asleep, I didn't want to wake you up."

"Thanks," Tony said, wishing a little that he'd been awake instead. "So, uh, did he say why?"

"Why he helped out?" Steve clarified. He grinned and took a sip of coffee. "Something about feeling sorry for our medical advancements."

"That sounds like him," Tony said, trying to sound scornful.

"He's coming around," Steve said confidently.

"Really," Tony said.

Steve had those bright eyes again. "Yeah," he said. "Took him some time, but I think it's going to happen."

"Ease up on the enthusiasm," Tony said halfheartedly. Inside he was *almost* gleeful. "Loki's still Loki."

Steve nodded his head. "Right. I haven't forgotten." He took another drink from his mug. "But he's

not all bad. Thor's got some great stories." Steve glanced over at the clock. "Are you gonna stick around for breakfast?"

"Sure," Tony said, if only to try and get a few more stories out of the captain.

A few hours later Tony was showered and casually dressed, the subtle scent of bergamot and ginger clinging to him. His face was freshly shaved and smooth, his hair crafted but messy.

"Jarvis," he said. "Is Loki awake?"

"Yes. He's in his living room," the AI replied.

"Not for long," Tony muttered, leaving his room.

The god grinned, wide and uninhibited when he saw Tony stepping out of the elevator and walking towards him. "You've come to keep your part of the bargain," he said as Tony eased down over him, pinning him against the chair. "A wise decision," he said, cupping the back of Tony's head with his hand and pulling Tony's ear against his lips.

"Genius, remember," Tony said.

"So you've said," Loki replied. He smelt of pine needles and wintry morning air, kissed with dark notes of musky amber. His body was warm, his long limbs wrapping around Tony, pulling him in. The man's breath was hot against his skin, Loki could feel Tony's pulse in the man's neck. "Shall we see how creative that intellect can be?"

"You've earned it," Tony said. He greedily took the god's mouth in his own, pushing his hot tongue against those sharp teeth and then possessively biting the god's lips before pulling back just enough to say, "What did you have in mind?"

Loki groaned and irritably opened his eyes, impatient with the interruption. He rocked his hips against Tony, eager for friction, desperate to have those lips against his again. "Surprise me," he said, taking Tony's mouth in his own again. His fingernails rubbed up through Tony's scalp, leaving a trail behind where the gelled hair had parted. He moaned into Tony, rocking up against the man in his lap, who had grabbed onto his long dark hair and pulled it, bending his neck.

"We should move somewhere more suitable," Tony said sensibly, kissing Loki's exposed neck. Tony's cheeks were flushed, a wired look was in his eyes. He glanced towards the bedroom.

"No," Loki said, pulling Tony's face and attention back on him. "This is fine." His hand slipped up under Tony's cotton shirt, pressing tentatively against the man's side. Tony reflexively twisted, as though he were ticklish. He surrendered a sigh when Loki thrust up towards him again. The god's cool hand slowly pressed up against the man's ribs, fingers dipping into the soft space between them. One finger circled his nipple. Then he felt a tap on the arc reactor as those long fingers drummed against it, straining against the shirt and the weight of Tony down against him. Tony's breath skipped. Loki grinned, taking the hem of Tony's shirt with his free hand and leisurely pulling it up like a curtain, watching with anticipation as smooth skin appeared beneath it. The shirt fell onto the floor. "Better," Loki said, kissing the crook of Tony's neck.

Tony only moaned in reply. Impatiently he fumbled with the god's shirt, roughly yanking at a leather strap that crossed the chest. The metal clicked in protest as the strap hissed past the latch. Still wearing Asgardian things, Tony thought for a second, forgetting it in the next when he got the skin that he wanted. He sucked hard at the god's clavicle, certain that it would bruise the skin. Loki

only pulled him in closer, groaning.

"Emergency Avengers dispatch notice," Jarvis announced.

"God damnit," Tony said, tripping over his breath. His whole body ached. He leaned back from Loki and felt the skin on his back twinge in the wakes of jagged lines that the god had put there with his finger nails. As he made to stand Loki grabbed onto him, pulling a wet, mouthy kiss from him. "I have to go," Tony said, gasping and pulling back, saliva dripping from his lips. He stood up from the chair.

"Two minute departure notice," Jarvis said. Tony grabbed his shirt off the floor in a rush, and as he pulled it back over his head he heard a very low, unpleasant sound of disappointment escape Loki's throat.

"I'll make it up to you," Tony said, turning his back, rushing towards the elevator. Loki said nothing. As the doors closed Tony slapped at his own cheeks, trying to bring himself back into focus. Jarvis began dispatching information about the mission as he rocketed towards the lab and his Iron Man suit. Tony was hot and hard with a miserable, heavy aching, and there wasn't time to remedy any of it because he was in the suit and flying towards Queens seconds later. Instead he tried maxing the suit's cooling system, blaring music in his ears to mentally distract himself from the tight agony in his groin.

Fifteen minutes later he forgot everything, aware only of the crunch of impacting metal along his side as an extraterrestrial creature made contact with his suit. He felt warmth pooling in his side, pain stabbing indiscriminately along his ribs and warmth soaking the fabric of his shirt and the soft inner padding of the suit. Jarvis' voice was urgent, repeating itself, though it sounded so very far away. Tony slipped into darkness.

"I'm calling him," Bruce said. Natasha nodded, watching as the man held a cell phone up to his ear. She had Tony's face plate in one hand. Her other hand was at Tony's neck, holding steady against his faint pulse. They hadn't seen Tony go down, hadn't realized that he was missing until Bruce was back from the other guy. Steve had found Tony, curled up on a stretch of pavement, crimson blood leaking from the dented suit. "Loki," Bruce said. He didn't wait for a greeting. "We need you. Tony's in a bad way. Just heal him and I won't ask anything in exchange for---he's bleeding, I don't think we can---minutes, maybe. Downtown---" Bruce looked down at the disconnected phone. "He didn't ask where we were," Bruce said. He pressed redial.

He hung up the phone a second later when a flash of green signaled the god's arrival. Loki's outer facade was calm, calculated, but his movements were tense. Natasha lifted her hand away from Tony's neck, scooting aside for Loki. He peeled off the metal suit like onion skin.

His fingers spread out over Tony's blood soaked shirt, flickers of magic pulsating down from them. He lifted his hands onto Tony's chest and closed his eyes, his magic skipping through the unconscious body, flooding the damaged areas. It was even worse than he had first assumed. The injuries were extensive, complicated by the time that Tony had been injured and unconscious. Loki felt Tony's pulse quickening as magic reversed the blood loss. Opening his eyes, Loki looked down at the mortal man. He considered. Then with a note of scorn he pulled off the t-shirt as well to see the bruised skin beneath it. A rib was incorrectly positioned.

Tony's chest looked nothing like it had less than an hour before. It wasn't flushed with arousal. It was black and blue, covered in both dried and fresh blood. So fragile, so helplessly mortal. He felt back down into the body again with magic, gently positioning the misplaced rib back in correctly.

Now Tony's condition was stable. As he set to repairing the bruising and less demanding injuries, Loki found that he was angry. Furious, even. How could Tony get himself into a position like this? Who did he think he was? Did he not understand how fragile he was? Did he not think what would happen if Bruce had not called for help? Loki would have to work spells on the mortal, make certain that this could not happen again. No, he would have to teach Tony to never do this again. What had he done? How could Tony allow this?

Tony remained unconscious, but internally he was well now, safe from death's grip. Loki had brushed away the surface injuries. If it weren't for the horrific state of the Iron Man suit, the day's incident would've been impossible to tell.

Loki stood up. "Thank you," Bruce said. "You've saved his life." Loki looked down at Bruce and Natasha, both still crouched on the ground beside Tony.

"Where are the others?" He said.

"Steve went looking for help, Thor and Barton are still finishing off one of the---never mind," Natasha said, recognizing the two men walking towards them from afar. Loki rushed straight to Thor, brushing aside Clint.

"Watch it," Clint said.

"Would you prefer me to be with Romanov, Hawkeye? And I thought we had something special," Loki said. Clint said nothing and hastened his way back over to the group, sitting down beside Natasha and glaring at the gods in the distance.

Thor surveyed his brother cautiously.

"You are not to allow this," Loki said.

"What?" Thor said, smiling incredulously.

"Their fighting. They're not strong like us," Loki said. "How can you let them---"

"---what? Enjoy the glory of battle?"

"Glory? There is no glory in this," Loki snarled, gesturing back towards Tony's quiet body. The group of Avengers were watching the god's animated movements anxiously, unable to hear what was being said.

"Loki, this is what they have chosen. They are warriors," Thor said, amused. Loki was livid.

"They are weak and incapable of defending themselves. They break like---"

"Can it be that you care?" Thor said.

Loki sneered. "I find it pitiful," he said.

"I recall a time they defeated you," Thor said. "They are not so weak."

The two fell silent, evaluating the other. Steve had returned with an ambulance. The paramedics were stepping out. The team was explaining the situation and turning the ambulance away. Loki watched the scene unfolding, anger building in his chest. Like they could have saved Tony. He had been on the brink of death.

"You have failed them," Loki said. "You let this happen."

Thor recoiled. "I did not. They are warriors as am I, we---"

Loki had vanished.

Thor watched the empty space where his brother had been for some time before returning to the team. Clint and Steve were piling the scraps of Tony's suit into the back of a SHIELD car that had just pulled up. Bruce and Natasha were lying Tony across the back seat of another vehicle that the team had driven there. Silently, Thor got in the other car with Steve and Clint.

As they entered lower Manhattan Tony stirred to life again.

"It's good to see you breathing," Bruce said from the front passenger side seat. Natasha was driving.

"That's not exactly a talent," Tony quipped, sitting up. His hand went to the injury. Astonished, he ran his hands up and down his sides. Nothing was there. "What happened?" He said, seeking confirmation for what he expected.

"Loki did that," Bruce said. He had broken eye contact with Tony and was looking out the window now. "I called him."

"You---called him?"

"Don't be mad," Bruce said. "I know you're not on good terms with him, but he saved your life. By the time we found you, you had excessive internal injuries and were bleeding out. Honestly, Tony, I think you had minutes left to live." He turned back around. "So I asked Loki to help. Me and him, we, sort of have a deal," he said slowly, quietly.

"What do you mean you have a deal?" Tony said, leaning his bare chest forward from the seat.

"Loki and I meet to talk occasionally. He tells me scientific advances in exchange for me telling him about our world." Bruce was watching Tony's reflection in the window, too tense to turn around and see Tony directly.

"How long has this been going on?" Tony demanded.

"A few weeks, at least..." Bruce trailed off.

"And when did you plan to tell me?"

Bruce drew in a breath. "Tony," he said. "It's not that big of a deal."

"Not that big of a deal? You're having secret meetings with the god of chaos and that isn't a big deal?" His voice was climbing. "If it's not that big of a deal, then is that why you've been hiding it?"

"Yes, actually," Bruce said. "Because I knew it would upset you, okay? Listen," he said, turning around. "I can handle Loki. I've done it before. I'm getting something useful out of the deal. And if Loki learns about wine or whatever the hell his fickle mind is interested in this week, what harm does it do? I'm not telling him anything he couldn't figure out on his own."

Tony fell silent.

"If I hadn't been meeting with him Tony, I probably wouldn't have been able to ask him to save you today," Bruce said, his tone kinder. "Those weren't injuries that I could just fix."

Tony was quiet until Natasha brought the car up into the tower garage. "Did he ask you to pay a price for saving me?" Tony said, his voice dark and unsteady.

Bruce shook his head. "Not on the phone, no. He came immediately."

"Will you tell me if he does ask something from you?"

"Yeah," Bruce said. Tony made sure to lock eyes with him, a question in his intensity. "I will," Bruce assured him.

They stepped out of their car just as the one with Steve, Clint, and Thor in it arrived. They clamored around Tony, glad to see him walking. He accepted the attention until he caught sight of the shreds of his Iron Man suit in the back of the car. "My baby," he gasped, running over to it. There was no doubt that it was beyond repair.

With some coaxing, they got Tony to go inside the tower, though he was distraught over the state of the suit. They promised him that he could build a new one later. For now, the team headed to the common room to unwind from the mission together.

The focus of the room gravitated back to Tony. Though they were exhausted, the team was getting loud, joking with one another. They took a few jabs at SHIELD, for sending them on a mission that was essentially clean up. Fury had called on them to contain an experiment that had gone wrong. It would've been a boring way to go, Tony insisted.

Thor was saying nothing, Steve noticed. The Asgardian didn't have his usual post-battle high. "Hey," Steve said to him, "would you come with me to the kitchen to grab some drinks for everyone?"

"Of course," Thor said, standing up. He followed Steve out of the room.

"You seem a little down for a guy whose brother just saved the day," Steve said as they entered the kitchen. Thor stopped and sat down on the kitchen table. "What did he say back there?" Steve asked.

"That I failed the team. He sees the fault in Tony's injury as being my own."

"He's wrong," Steve said. "A fight's a fight." He crossed his arms. Thor looked up at him, his long blond hair wavy with sweat and dirt from the battle. He had grime across parts of his face, and still wore his well tested armor. The captain was also still in uniform, with some of Tony's blood dried along his arms.

"So said I," Thor said, grinning. The grin fell flat. "Loki thinks I have failed him," Thor confessed.

"For his own choices?" Steve asked. Thor had told him as much before. Of the entire team, Steve was the one that the god turned to. "It's not your fault," Steve said when Thor did not answer.

"Loki's made his own decisions, alright? You can't do everything for him, Thor. And if you think that what happened to Tony today is your fault, you're wrong. If it's anyone's fault, it's mine. I lead this team. I take responsibility for everyone. Listen," he said. "Accidents happen. Soldiers fall. You've just gotta make peace with that the best you can and," he paused. "Hey, look at it this way. Loki saved someone's life today."

Thor genuinely smiled this time. "He did," Thor said. "Perhaps he really is changing this time."

"You know what I think?" Steve said. "I think he's uncomfortable being a hero and he took it out on you. Don't worry about it."

Thor considered that. The captain said it so earnestly, with so much conviction. He decided to believe that Steve was right. "Shall we celebrate our victory?"

Steve was already ahead of him, pulling drinks out of the refrigerator. With Thor's help they were back in the common room with drinks a few minutes later, the grungy team comfortably assembled together.

It was Bruce that suggested they invite Loki down to join them. "No, no," Tony said, cutting him off. Tony's head was spinning. The steamy morning memory came to him, then the confusion of the battle, and waking up in the car. Bruce's news. Tony was angry about that. Why was Loki meeting with Bruce in the first place? Then there was the entire *Loki saved his life* part of it. It had been easier when Loki threw him out the window. In the chaos of all of that, Tony was only certain that when he saw Loki again, he wanted it to be when they were alone. He couldn't play their charade in front of the team today. "Just let me thank him when we're not all exhausted, okay?"

"Tony," Steve chided him.

"Not now," Tony said. "I got the shit knocked out of me, let me set my own pace, okay?"

If Steve hadn't found him bleeding out on the concrete only a little before he might've been angrier. Instead, he was just still glad to have the defiant billionaire back.

"We'll set up a Loki play date another time," Bruce said.

"Awesome," Tony said, reaching out for a drink. He was hiding it, but his nerves were shot. He had no idea what to expect from the god or himself when they met again. So he drowned himself in the boisterous chatter of the team, alcohol helping him to run from those thoughts. Elsewhere, far from the team's celebration, Loki paced back and forth, his emotion running wild with his mind, the sight of Tony's helpless body invading his thoughts like a bird with a broken wing.

That You Are Mine

It was quiet upstairs. The enchanted fire had long ago died, snuffed out by the whim of its creator. Loki had left the tower, unable to handle the sight of the walls there any longer.

His only refuge, the tiny cobbled room lined with old books, was of no comfort to him. At first he had gone there, only to find irritation in the memories that surfaced. This was where he had first taken Tony, so long ago, when things had been, well, different. It had only been a capricious, meaningless affair then. A distraction. A thrill.

Tony's frightened eyes flickered, pupils dilated, clever mahogany rings flecked with impulse and a burning need for self-destruction. The ghost of him sat up from the floor where he had once been, grinning like a fool. Loki turned away from the memory, focusing on the walls of the room instead. He snatched a book off the shelf. He meant to cross the room, to sit at the table there. Instead, Tony's ghost beckoned him again. How the man had *wanted* him. He'd forgotten, when they'd met, how it felt to be desired so wholly, to be so adamantly needed by another. Once it had begun, it was intoxicating. The poison still called his veins home.

He left the ghost behind, and ran. Loki had nowhere to go anymore, nowhere that he could truly call his own. Not even Asgard. The realm no longer appealed to him. He had meant it. He wanted nothing of the land that had stolen him. He would not answer its call again. Nor would he ask of it any favors. It was beneath him.

Instead he found a grassy, tawny field. Alone and in an uninhabited stretch of the realms, he walked. He flexed his fingers above his head. All was not lost. He just needed some time to clear his thoughts, he decided. Later he would return to the tower and make Tony beg for the forgiveness Tony so absolutely needed to ask from Loki. He would make Tony remember who was a god.

The thought was not as comforting as he'd hoped it would be. Instead, it lassoed around him, the weight of it dragging him down into a sea. Tony could never really stop him. Not really. Sure, Tony could keep up with him, and Tony was deliciously capable of satiating his silver tongue, sharp enough to keep up and reckless enough to try. It was not an easy combination to find. Tony's broken body bled into his mind's eye again. For the hundredth time that day, he pushed it away.

Things had been far easier when he'd only craved revenge on the Avengers. Now that he wanted Tony to survive...

Anger came flooding in again. Contempt. How had Tony gotten into such a situation? How could Tony break like that? Why? Didn't he understand? Didn't he know?

Loki fantasized about biting into a golden apple, its crisp, sweet skin breaking beneath his sharp teeth. He imagined taking Tony's scruff of hair in his grip, bending the man's head back, forcing the juice past Tony's lips with his own. Crushing the apple for his tender little mortal, impelling his fragile creature to swallow each bite as he sunk his teeth into the flesh of the apple for the mortal, a clean crunch playing like the drum beat of a song with each bite. Until, at last, the core dropped to the ground with a heavy thud from his hand, and he would never again fear the inevitable.

He would never again have to feel those weak, pitiful organs shutting down on themselves, would never have to feel his magic telling him that it was practically a corpse that he was feeling, would never have to take a pleading phone call from a shaking voice that Tony needed his help.

He ceased his pacing and sat down in the field. It reminded him of the dream he'd had, though that field had been blanketed by snow. There was no tree with a nonsensical bird in it here. Loki took a long breath.

He enjoyed toying with the mortals. They were fascinating, each of them. They were like an acquired taste, and now that he had become accustomed to them, he craved the entertainment they gave him. Even Pepper was a welcome conflict. They were like little marionettes to him. Harmless, and he could cast them aside when he grew tired of them, keeping Tony for himself. And their realm---it was so broken, but it had such potential. It just needed the right guidance.

Irritation snagged his thoughts. Thor was there. Of course, Loki thought with loathing, Thor was there. Of course Thor had been given the Midgardian realm by the all-father, of course Thor had been the first to realize its potential benefits. Of course he was first. Did Thor not have his own mortal? Did Thor not enjoy the entertainment of those Midgardians?

And yet, Thor was the only other being in the nine realms that could comprehend how this felt. Loki hated himself for realizing that he wanted to talk to Thor, wanted to pick Thor's brain for the secret to making the queasy reality of Tony's frailty go away.

Of course, Tony's fate had to be intertwined with Thor's.

Loki took refuge in anger.

"Are you kidding me?" Pepper's voice was furious, unyielding. "You couldn't even bother with a lousy phone call?"

"Pep, nobody wanted to upset you. I'm fine," Tony said, grinning, turning around slowly with his hands up to demonstrate to her just how fine he was. She'd just returned from a business trip. "I knew you were coming back this morning, I decided to let you sleep through the night without being upset. It was just a little battle mix up, okay?"

"Unbelievable," Pepper said. She was staring at the scraps of the Iron Man suit in the lobby, where the team had left them yesterday. Tony'd forgotten they were there when he came down to greet Pepper. "If I hadn't walked in and seen that, would you have told me at all?"

"Under a lower stress situation," Tony said, trying to placate her with charm. "Preferably over breakfast. Come on, I'll take you out. We can go to that place you like by---"

"No," Pepper said. She walked over to the suit to examine it more closely. It was nothing more than ribbons of twisted scrap metal. Cautiously, she picked one strip up with her soft fingers and felt her stomach drop. The metal clanked as she set it back down. "How did you survive this?" She said quietly.

"I---"

"And don't lie to me," she snapped.

Tony bit his bottom lip faintly before speaking. "Loki," Tony said, feeling the name resound with power on his tongue. "He healed me."

"Pepper, where are you going?" He called after her.

She spun around from the elevator, her lips in a taut line, eyes narrowed towards Tony. "To thank

him,” she said.

Tony wasn't sure whether to follow after her or let her go. “Anthony Stark,” she said, her voice twisting down into a growl, “that suit looks like a party streamer. If Loki's the reason you survived that, I am going to thank him. Now you can turn off that stupid little alarm system you have for Loki and me. We can handle being in the same room.” She saw Tony's eyes widen with that new information. “Bruce told me,” she said, jamming the door ajar button to prolong their conversation.

“Yeah? Did he tell you that he's been having secret meetings with Loki?” Tony said, still uncertain whether he wanted to follow after her.

“Yeah, and he's been afraid to tell you because he knew you'd get upset. Looks like he was right,” Pepper said.

“Pep, come on, you've only been back five minutes, let's not start out like this,” Tony said, moving a little closer.

Pepper released the door ajar button. “Too late for that,” she said, irritated. “The next time you get mortally wounded, I'd appreciate a phone call,” she called out as the doors closed.

Tony was left alone with the reality of the suit.

“Loki,” Pepper called out. The room was empty. “Loki,” she called louder.

A realm away, his magic picked up on the disturbance. He recognized her voice. Curiosity beckoned him.

“Ms. Potts,” he said, materializing a few feet away.

She stepped out of the elevator, towards him. He could see the anger pin balling through her features, crunching into jagged angles in her elbows and along the seams of her business suit. In her face, though, he found something else. “Thank you,” she said, the words bravely leaving her lips with gratitude.

He studied her again before responding. “I assume you came on behalf of Tony,” he said, crossing his arms.

“On behalf of?” She said. Before he could open his mouth her exasperated sigh and eye roll surprised the words right from him. “I swear,” she said, eyes fixed up irritably towards the ceiling. “He hasn't come and thanked you yet, has he?”

Her perception impressed him.

“He's so stubborn,” she said, reading the god's face, “And I thought it was bad that he couldn't even give me a fucking phone call. This, this is just incredible.”

Loki nodded, his cold eyes locked in on the woman. Her fury was endearing her to him, ever so faintly. “Thank you,” she said again, her anger making the words blunt and graceless. She found

herself feeling sympathy for Loki. A phone call wasn't the end of the world, but how was the god feeling? No, she shouldn't sympathize with him.

A moment passed.

"Would you care to take a seat," Loki said, gesturing towards the chairs. "This doesn't change our relationship," Loki clarified.

"Of course not," Pepper said as she accepted the invitation. "Jarvis," she said, "cut the feed of any footage in this room. And delete the last few minutes, would you?"

"Yes, Ms. Potts," the AI said. She frowned.

"I should've done that when I walked in," Pepper said. "He's probably already watched that," she said irritably. "Let's agree to let him wonder about this meeting?"

Loki opened his palms up amiably. "Fine by me."

"What happened?" Pepper said. "I'm assuming it was more than a little accident."

Loki recognized true concern beneath her terse execution of the question. "He was bleeding out," Loki said, unpleasantly reliving the memory himself. "His body was failing."

"How'd he get injured?" She was intense, adamant.

Loki glanced away from her. He hadn't been told that. He'd only been called to the scene. "I'm not certain," he confessed, his voice level and detached.

"I'll get it out of Natasha," Pepper said. "I'm sick of coming back to this," she muttered. "But, for once," she said, softening, "I'm glad you're here. As much as I hate his behavior, I'd hate losing him more."

Loki bit back the urge to agree with that sentiment.

"I never thought I'd be up here thanking you for saving his life," Pepper said airily, gazing around the room.

"Nor did I," Loki agreed this time.

The chair that Pepper and Bruce had used to transport Loki to his room when he'd been drunk was off in a corner. She smiled a little. "Do you want me to take that back downstairs with me?" She said, gesturing towards the chair.

Loki turned his head. In a different time he might have laughed. "It was a wretched chair to sleep in," he said, snapping his fingers. The chair vanished, returning beside Clint in the common room with a loud bang. The archer screamed and jumped up. Loki would've enjoyed that, had he been there.

Pepper massaged the back of her neck with her fingers, thinking. She'd intended to go straight back to work after stopping by the tower. That was before she'd seen the Iron Man suit. Now she'd have to reorganize her day, making room for figuring out what happened to Tony from the rest of the team. It was exhausting, running a massive company with Tony at the helm. Loki could see the fatigue in her. Sensing his focus on her, she reigned her distracted mind back. "Thanks again," she said. "I should probably get going," Pepper said awkwardly.

Loki inclined his head in observance of her statement. She left, saying goodbye with a tiny smile.

He rose from the chair, resuming his pacing of the room. Pepper's visit had inspired him. Loki had been far too kind with Tony, he decided. Pepper certainly was.

Tony had scrapped the suit. The pieces were worthless and laughably beyond repair. Now his hands were covered in oil and grease, and Jarvis was working to keep up with his commands. This suit would be better, unbreakable.

Tony needed unbreakable. He was furious. Did anyone see how hard he was trying to keep things together? As if he'd intended to get hurt. Damn him for trying to give Pepper peace of mind, and damn him for trying to protect Bruce from Loki's schemes. And trying to protect Pepper and Loki from each other. "You can turn off that stupid little alarm system you have for Loki and me," he recalled Pepper saying.

Didn't any of them get it?

Tony kicked a wrench across the lab, listening with satisfaction as it impacted the wall with an echoing clang. Was it so terrible that he wanted to be Pepper's best hopes for who he could be? For him to be the man she believed in? To be worthy of her loyalty? Was it so terrible that he also wanted to be the light in Loki's darkness? To wake in the morning and see something tender peeking out from the center of chaos? Was it so terrible that he couldn't step out of either life, that he couldn't abandon either of them?

He was trying so hard to be everything to everyone.

Of course he had been broken.

Tony picked up a loose bolt and threw it against the wall, listening to its pathetic dink as it hit the wall and bounced back towards him. And Bruce, going behind his back. Bruce who should've known better. Loki was always up to something, it was a part of who he was. And Loki! Going to one of his best friends to talk about what exactly? Making deals? Tony threw another bolt against the wall.

This suit would be fucking perfect. And they could all stay the fuck out until he had finished it. Jarvis locked the lab doors.

"I don't see why I have to be the one to do it," Clint said, standing up.

Steve and Natasha had already made up their minds. "You're the one he's most likely to listen to," Natasha said. "Just go try." He was going to, of course, but it didn't mean that he wouldn't complain about it first.

"I say we just let him keep at it until he wears himself out," Clint said.

Steve frowned. "I'm sure he already has," he said. Tony had been locked in the lab for three days now, and had missed an Avenger's mission the day prior. Though they couldn't really blame him for that, seeing as how his suit was. He claimed that the other models were offline and incapable of immediate dispatch, but no one really believed him. They assumed that he was still shaken up from the last mission. Not that they were going to call him out on it. Not yet.

Clint shrugged. "Probably," he said, leaving. When he arrived at the lab doors, they were locked, not that he was surprised. He slammed his fist against them. "Hey," he shouted. "Tony!"

"Mr. Stark is unable to receive calls," Jarvis said.

"Shut the fuck up, Jarvis," Clint said, pounding against the door. "Just open up!" Clint yelled. No response came. He leaned against the door, listening. It was silent. He didn't even hear Tony's music. "Jarvis, you wanna show me the footage from inside the lab?"

"You are not authorized," Jarvis said. Clint slammed on the door again.

"Tony, could you at least prove that you're alive?" Clint shouted with frustration.

"Alive," Tony's voice said glibly through Jarvis.

"Great!" Clint shouted. "Now try opening the fucking door." No response.

Jarvis spoke this time. "Mr. Stark would like to inform you that you are interrupting his creative process."

"Yeah, well tell him that his creative process is getting real old," Clint said. This was progress, though. At least Tony had responded. Aside from refusing to go on the Avenger's mission, they hadn't gotten anything out of him since he'd gone into the lab. "Tony, you get one more day in there and then we're gonna hulk smash it down," Clint threatened. He left. He knew he wasn't getting anything else out of Tony that day.

Tony watched Clint leave on the security footage. They wouldn't really smash into the lab, would they? He wasn't sure that they'd be able to handle what they saw, if they did.

Loki had not waited long after Pepper's departure from his floor. Once Jarvis confirmed that Tony was in the lab, Loki was ready. He adorned himself in full battle regalia, right up to the horned helmet that Tony so loved to belittle. Today it would put him in his place.

Tony could sense Loki before he saw him. The lab dimmed, and the monitors around Tony glared in bright blue. Out of the corner of his eye he saw a monitor flicker and warp before righting itself again. His heart began racing, pounding against his chest and the arc reactor. He froze, refusing to let on any of it. "You know, I do think the lab is off limits to you," Tony said conversationally, attention focused on the metal arm piece in his hands.

"Everyone condones breaking the rules when it's for something they want," Loki said from the darkness. Tony would not look around, he would not see where the voice was coming from.

"Do you ever get tired of being creepy?" Tony said, flipping the arm piece over and reaching out

for a screwdriver. He used it to pry at something inside the piece.

Loki didn't answer. Tony's heart raced faster, recognizing it as the calm before the storm. His spine tingled, making his back go rigid. He could feel his palms getting sweaty. The monitor beside him distorted in the air, the blue waves of light rippling out and then fracturing. "Be careful with the tech, would you?" Tony said.

Loki's face materialized in the darkness then, his sharp cheekbones obscured behind something, his eyes glinted with power. He stepped forward, his form solid and undeniable, the garment he wore flaring out from his tall figure. Tony saw the blue glow against the polished helmet and completely in spite of himself sucked in a gasp just a little too audibly. "Frightened, love?" Loki asked, stepping onto the suit, effortlessly sinking his foot down into the metal Tony had spent the last forty-five minutes shaping. He towered over the man, the whites of his eyes emblazoning his feral pupils. Leaning down, he brought his face just inches from Tony's.

"Is that a cow on your head or is your helmet happy to see me?" Tony said defiantly, forcing a toothy grin onto his mouth.

Loki's hand made contact with his throat lightning fast, dragging the man up off his feet like a paper doll. Tony clutched at Loki's forearms, kicking his feet. The god walked leisurely then, comfortably dragging Tony over to a wall. He dropped him.

Tony crumpled back against the wall, struggling to catch his breath. "The fuck is your problem?" He came back, furiously still trying to breathe. Loki grabbed onto his shoulders and forced him back against the cold wall.

"You," Loki said, grabbing under Tony's chin domineeringly, forcing the man to look at him. "You," he said, "have forgotten who I am."

Tony rolled his eyes. "Yeah? Maybe I should ask Bruce to remind me," Tony said, pushing his shoulders against Loki's vice grip, trying to get away from the wall. "No, that would be your thing though, wouldn't it?"

Loki sneered. "You think you have cause to begrudge me?" He said incredulously. "Tell me," he said in a vicious whisper, "are you angry that I went to Banner, or are you angry that I did not come to you?"

Tony scoffed, theatrically tossing out an indignant breath. He looked away. "Yeah, like it's that simple." He brought himself to stare into Loki, not because he was succumbing to the sharp fingers pressing up into his jaw, but because he wanted to challenge the god. "Nothing's ever that simple with you, Loki."

"And here I was about to say the same for you," Loki sneered back. Tony smiled unkindly.

"You're using him," Tony accused. "For some scheme or another---"

"Enough!" Loki shouted, stepping back from Tony. The man stumbled, forced to catch his balance now that there was nothing holding him to the wall. He stayed there, looking up at the glowering god. "You will not stand before me and question me!"

"Oh I'm sorry your majesty," Tony shot back. Loki's hand was at his throat again, forcing him back against the wall. He smiled anyway, forcing the white crescent into Loki like a blade. The god saw his defiance and only pushed Tony harder into the wall, pinning Tony's chest with his free arm.

Loki condescendingly leaned his face down close to Tony, letting his hot breath brush like sandpaper over Tony's skin. "You are a delusional, ungrateful, impudent little mortal, and you will answer to me."

"Back to the ego mania, huh," Tony whispered.

Loki released Tony's throat, tracing his fingers possessively up the side of Tony's face. "You," he said with half-veiled eyes, watching his own fingertips, "are so pitifully weak." Loki dipped one of the fingernails down, scratching Tony's skin. "Does that hurt?" Tony didn't answer. "Of course it does," Loki said. A drop of blood rose to the surface and slid down Tony's face. "It hurts because you are fragile."

"Loki," Tony said, his voice going soft for the first time since Loki entered the lab, "Come on." He didn't hide his fear now. Loki did not acknowledge him. Instead he let his second fingernail scratch the surface, intent on watching it break the skin and slowly draw blood. Tense against the cold wall, Tony closed his eyes, acutely aware of the stinging on his face, of the heat that seeped from the surface of it, of the pressure holding him there. "Loki."

"Do not speak to me," Loki commanded, a third finger nail cutting Tony. Then a fourth. Tony opened his eyes again, staring. He felt Loki's warm magic pool down into the first cut, sewing up the harmless incision, making it cease to exist. "See?" Loki said, repeating the action down each cut, pushing his finger down. "Fragile." He cut the skin again and watched it bleed before patching it up again. Tony tried to push away, to get off of the wall. Loki's arm effortlessly held him there. "You aren't going anywhere," Loki said.

The crumpled Iron Man suit floated towards them then, glowing in the grip of green magic. Loki watched its reflection in Tony's eyes. He tore the suit apart, crushing each piece like paper, tossing their worthless forms against the floor. "This is easy for me," Loki said. "It will be easy for someone else."

He felt Tony's heart pounding, could hear the man's frantic breath. "You may don that suit and think yourself a god, but do not forget who the true gods are," he said. The last piece of the crumpled suit fell to the ground, its clang echoing across the lab. "I will not make a habit of animating your corpse, Anthony." All Tony could focus on was the green around Loki's eyes. "I will not be subject to the whims of such an impudent creature."

"Loki, I'm sorry," Tony said, his head spinning. The god had not been like this in months. Sure, he had moments, but not like this. He wanted his early morning Loki back, not armored Loki.

"You may beg for my forgiveness later," Loki said, running his hand through the hair on top of Tony's head. It was meant to bestow comfort, as though Loki's reassurance were some great gift. "For now," he said, "you will be rebuilding that suit for your god." Loki traced his thumb along the side of Tony's chin. "And you will not stop until I deem it worthy of holding your weak body. Do you understand, my little pet?"

Tony's face flickered. He would not be called that. Now, however, was not the time to assert that, he decided with resounding self-restraint. Loki interpreted his silence as a yes. "I will be checking in on you," Loki said, stepping back. Near him, a shadow peeled from the wall, stepping forward in a ghostly humanoid figure. When Tony brought his attention back from it, Loki was gone.

Tony sat down in his lab chair, trying to catch up with himself. He closed his eyes. The lights in the room rose again, alerting him. The ghostly figure was still there, standing close to the suit's crumpled remains. At first Tony decided to ignore it, turning his attention to designing. A while later he tried getting Jarvis to analyze it, but the AI couldn't recognize that there was anything at all

unusual about a shadow, let alone how it was existing in such an eerie way. By the time Tony had made his first suit protocol, he'd completely forgotten about the thing. Until he turned the suit on. The shadow creature snapped to life, dismantling the suit at the joints with flickers of magic before resuming its dormant state.

The next day Tony was halfway finished with the designs for another suit (with reinforced limbs) when Jarvis interrupted. There was a mission to go on. Loki materialized in front of him, shaking his head. Tony turned down the mission. The god nodded, as if to say correct, before vanishing again. Another shadow creature peeled off of the wall.

By the time Clint came pounding on the doors, there were five shadows in the room. Each one seemed content with torturing the suit in some new way, sending Tony back to the drawing board. Occasionally they would touch the suit and nothing would happen. Tony hoped that was a good sign. He wanted Loki to come into the lab, to explain what was happening. The god ignored him.

That Calm Before A Storm

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“Loki,” Tony’s voice came through Jarvis. “Loki, just stop it already, would you? I’m bored of the foreplay. Come on, I’m getting claustrophobic down here, I think I’m running out of air, I think---”

He shut the electronic voice off. His mortal was fine, he had made sure of that, and he would not be subjected to the man’s pleas. Threats. Bribes.

Instead he returned his attention to a particularly engrossing volume of literature, taking note of the time. Five o’clock. In thirty minutes the other residents expected him downstairs, to partake in another of their silly gatherings, and he would be there. Not out of a sense of duty, or obligation, but because playing with them was like a cat skewering goldfish from a bowl, and who was he to deny himself the pleasure?

Steve brightened the instant Loki’s lean figure strolled into the room and took a seat. The captain’s opinion of the god had increased significantly after rescuing Tony. “Hey there,” Steve called across the room. “We’re just setting up.” He tossed another bag of chips on the coffee table. It was movie night in the common room.

Loki nodded curtly, recoiling minutely from Thor, who had switched seats to sit by him. Natasha promptly took the other open seat closest to Loki. The impish smirk tucked underneath her pursed lips made no secret of her motive. Clint, her target, had locked eyes on her, openly ruffled. He threw himself into the seat beside her.

Bruce and Pepper were in attendance as well. They were comfortably chatting amongst themselves, paying no attention to Steve’s difficulty popping open a new DVD box.

“I don’t see why it’s necessary to shrink-wrap everything,” Steve muttered, the offending plastic film static clinging to his arm. With a loud pop the box opened, and he plucked the disc out. “Should we start?” He asked, glancing around the room.

“Yeah. Tony’s a no-show,” Clint said, grabbing a handful of chips. “Big surprise there.”

“I’m sure he’ll come around,” Pepper said crisply, sparing a sideways glance at Loki. The two had discussed the matter, with brief, sharp quips in the elevator. In simplest terms, Loki explained that Tony wouldn’t be leaving the lab until he had made an acceptable suit. The idea swept up Pepper’s approval instantly. It was probably also the reason that she’d set aside a bottle of the immortal’s favorite drink for him, having noticed during their last resident gathering.

“Yeah, as soon as we tear down the door,” Clint replied.

“That would be damaging my company property,” Pepper said, not without humor. “I can’t allow that.”

Steve opened the DVD player. “I guess we should start,” he said, pushing the drawer in. Jarvis dimmed the lights as he took a seat.

Clint leaned over Natasha’s seat, towards Loki. “Keep your vile hands to yourself,” he muttered under his breath.

Loki's eyebrow rose as he charitably inclined his head towards the archer. "You ask the god of lies to make a promise? Well, fine. I. Promise." Loki said, just low enough for Clint and Natasha to hear.

Natasha held her breath, desperately trying to contain a laugh. "It's a threat," Clint clarified.

"Is that what it is?" Loki asked.

Natasha pushed Clint's forehead away with her hand, forcing him back into his seat. "Who says I'll keep my hands to myself?" She teased the archer.

"Both of you," Clint hissed, loud enough for Thor to hear and Bruce to ignore. "Hands to yourselves."

Natasha and Loki shrugged noncommittally.

The movie was anything but engaging, though Loki was thoroughly entertained by Clint's incessant glances in his direction. The hawk's line of vision all but burned into him and the Black Widow. When at last the credits rolled, Clint stood at the same time as Natasha, clamoring to get between her and Loki. "Why Agent Barton," Loki said, not bothering to leave his chair, "if you wanted to so desperately, next time you can sit beside me. Though, I can't make any promises. Mortals such as you aren't my type," he said, glancing down at his nails.

"Yeah, right!" Clint positively crowed. "Don't flatter yourself," he said loudly, the attention in the room shifting towards them. "You're not my fuckin' type either."

Natasha started laughing, forcing Clint to relax a little. She seldom laughed, and when she did, for Clint it was like a wind chime breaking his mind away from whatever thoughts he had.

"We agree then," Loki said, rising from his chair. The others had started to leave. He picked up the half finished bottle that Pepper had set aside for him.

"Hey Loki," Natasha said, leaning against Clint. "Thanks again for the other day."

"Yeah," Clint said, "I guess you're not all creep."

"My," Loki said, bringing his hand to his chest, "how flattering."

Clint refused to grin, though the gesture amused him. "Yeah, yeah," he said. "Don't let it go to your head." It was Loki's turn to disguise his amusement. The two spies turned and left for the elevator, leaving Loki alone in the room. With the half full bottle in his hand he materialized back on his floor.

The bottle sat empty in his bedroom, his passed out body curled in the bed sheets. Peacefully he slept alone. Until a shadow peeled off the wall, drifting along beside him. He awoke to the urgent timbre of his own magic like a supernatural alarm.

Down in the lab Tony was watching the shadow creatures bristle and expand, then shrink back down to their usual size. When they began the action it had been terrifying, but now, an hour later,

they were still doing it and Tony had tired of it.

They had left the suit in tact that morning though. Either the creatures were broken, or the suit was done. Tony wasn't sure which one he wanted more.

They ceased their movement the moment that Loki appeared in the lab.

"Hey," Tony called out to the being from his computer chair. The shadow creatures drifted up around Loki, who had stooped over the suit, inspecting it. As his magic vibrated along the arms of the suit the shadow creatures made tiny noises, driving themselves up into a frenzy. Loki seemed not to notice. "What are those things?" Tony said. "I tried naming them, but there's not a lot to go off of. Destroyer. Pain In the Ass. Keeps Breaking Everything." Tony watched Loki's fingers curl around the suit. The shadow creatures became louder as he tapped on the helmet, sending a few sparks of magic flying. One of the creatures opened its mouth, eagerly swallowing the sparks and cooing. "Hey those aren't like, your children are they? Because if so we have some things we need to talk about, like---"

"Be quiet," Loki said firmly. The suit glowed green as he levitated it, turning the metal over. Several times he turned it, rotating it, sending sparks in and out. It seemed like an eternity before he set the suit down. The shadow creatures ravenously circled around him, shifting their sizes, making little squeaks and eerie whistles. Loki brushed his hand through the air, sending out a jettison of colored sparks that the specters gleefully consumed before slipping back into the walls. Tony heard the lab doors unlock by magic.

"That suit may be considered proficient," Loki said, not bothering to look at Tony. "You may use it on routine missions."

"Proficient?" Tony said. "Excuse me? I just busted my ass off for a week building that thing and all I get is a proficient? You locked me in my lab with those freaky ghost things and all I get is a proficient?!"

Loki turned his body in Tony's direction, away from where he had been inspecting the suit. He saw Tony's weariness, his exhaustion, his anger. They weren't enough. "Proficient," Loki said darkly, "is generous."

Now Tony was angry. "I'm sorry, did you build one of those? Because I'll have you know, that suit is some of the best god damn engineering this world has ever seen---"

"This world," Loki said. "This little, primitive world. You have no capacity to understand what lies beyond this. You have not seen what I have," Loki yelled back, "You have not fallen through the realms. No, you build a tower to your own monument and think yourself invincible!" Loki stood straight, rigid. "No, I will not sing praises to a man who has seen little and proclaims to know all."

"Whatever," Tony said, turning away.

He said nothing as Loki crossed the space between them. "You," Loki said, "know nothing." Though Loki stood over him, Tony slid from the computer chair, avoiding any contact. He started walking towards the doors.

"I may not know everything," Tony said over his shoulder, "but I have figured out a hell of a lot. Don't come into my lab and talk down to me."

When Loki did not answer him Tony knew it was bad. He knew it, and he didn't care. The whole week, fixing the suit hadn't really bothered him. He would've locked himself down there anyway.

No, he had just spent an entire week foolishly believing that there was something waiting for him at the end of it. Something other than a “proficient” and a lecture. He was going to the other side of those doors. Maybe he would reacquaint himself with the bottle of scotch up in the kitchen. See if the gloomy skyline had changed in a week. Pester Steve a little.

The closer he got to the doors without looking back, the greater his sense of foreboding grew. Anxiety shivered down his spine, pulsating along his back. Whatever was happening behind him, it wasn't good, and he didn't care. He grabbed onto the door handles and pushed, swinging the doors wide open.

Chapter End Notes

Hopefully I should have the following chapter up sometime this week.

That I Won't Let You Forget

The cold steel handles parted from his fingertips like doves, flying back with the doors in one moment of peace before slamming into the walls like thunder.

Tony walked on.

He walked all the way into the elevator, gently pressed the button for his floor, and closed his eyes. The elevator hummed along, gliding flawlessly past the floors, reassurance of his personal ingenuity.

He felt it lurch and come to a halt.

The figure waiting behind the open doors was not who he expected. He stepped forward, smiling. "Hey there, Pep, you wouldn't believe the day I'm having."

"So the suit's done then, is it?" Pepper said, looking down at a clipboard in her hands. She knew Tony's bullshitting-it-face better than anyone.

"Yeah," Tony said, grinning. "Better than any before it."

"And I'm assuming that Loki approved it," Pepper said, flipping over a piece of paper and clipping it. She saw Tony's grin drop, just for a heartbeat, before he was talking fast again. Bingo.

"Him and his army," Tony said. "I even updated the OS in it to allow for---" The doors chimed, opening onto one of the floors with a conference room.

Pepper lowered the clipboard and leaned against the elevator doors to prevent them from closing. "Do you know what the one thing I appreciate about this whole situation is?" She was smiling as she said it, and it was a smile Tony knew well. Not that he wanted to. "Somebody else gets to see just how reckless you are sometimes, Tony. We almost lose you and you brush it off." Pepper's eyelashes fluttered as she blinked rapidly, trying to hold a tear back. She reined it in and recomposed herself. "I know you're trying to hold it together Tony, and I appreciate that, but the other side is hard too. I'm glad there's someone else to hold you accountable to it. I meant it Tony, when I said you were all that I had. What did you think was going to happen to me when you died?" She leaned off the door, letting the sensor signal it to close.

"Pepper," Tony said, reaching his hand out, hitting the doors and sending them open again. "I'm not going to leave you alone."

"Can you guarantee that, Tony?" Pepper said, losing her composure all over again. A tear escaped the façade she was grasping on to. "No, don't even think about the Avengers or being Iron Man if that suit's not good enough Tony, because we need you too." She stepped away from the elevator, brushing a finger against her eye makeup irritably.

Tony let her go. The elevator took him to his room, but he knew it wasn't where he was supposed to be. If there was one thing that made Tony feel like shit, it was making Pepper cry. He could toss back anger, he could fight, he could brush it off, but seeing that tear on her lashes knocked the wind out of him. He couldn't argue with raw vulnerability.

Before the doors closed again he saw his bed, saw the twisted bed sheets. He gasped for a breath, his muscles tensing as he leaned back against the elevator wall, realization hitting him. Tony had seen the vulnerability of a god, and he had not recognized it for its significance. He had merely

accepted it. Now Loki's sleepy morning grin was greeting his helmeted fury in Tony's mind, and he felt like the floor had fallen out from beneath him. Fear crept in.

He closed his eyes again and breathed in slowly. How would he make it up to the two of them? It wasn't exactly something that he excelled at. Well, Tony thought, at least he wouldn't make the mistake of buying Pepper strawberries again.

Tony put his recklessness to good use and hit the lab floor button.

The doors were as he'd left them. Wide open, the empty lab just beyond. "Loki?" Tony called out, walking in. He was met by the echo of his own voice. With a tiny sigh of relief he saw that the suit was untouched. "Jarvis, where is Loki?"

"He is not present in the tower," Jarvis said. "Shall I take a message?"

"Shit," Tony said, grimacing. "Fuck, please don't be gone," he said to himself. "Jarvis, where did he go?"

"Unknown, sir."

Tony walked over to his computer chair and sat down. "Loki, I'm sorry, please don't play games like this," he said, resting his head in his palm, his elbow propped up on the desk. "I don't know how to fix this," he muttered.

He heard Jarvis' voice. "Is that truly how you feel, Stark?"

Tony sat up straight. "Loki?"

"Stark," Jarvis replied from Loki's lips. He stepped from the shadows. "You rely far too much on your technology." The god blinked, then a faint smile brightened his face.

"You're...not angry," Tony said. "Great, because, listen, I was hoping that you and I could hash this whole thing out, maybe go to that deli down the street. And you and Pepper both going on about that suit, I have to say it's unexpected, but, shit am I glad you're still here."

Loki smiled again, tilting his head to the side. He was not wearing the helmet, but the leather and green were back. "Who says I'm not angry," he said lyrically.

"I---"

"You walked out on me in a tantrum," Loki said casually. "I was right, you know."

He made Tony ask. "When?" Tony said when it was clear that Loki wouldn't volunteer the information.

"When I said you were made to be ruled, of course." Loki moved in, flaunting his height over Tony with a snide downward glance. "Your freedom has forced you to cling to your own pride. You *need* to be ruled, Tony."

Tony scoffed. "Really? You're back to that? I thought you were over it."

"You don't get to make the rules anymore," Loki said, taking Tony's chin in his hand. He brushed the stubble there back and forth with the pad of his thumb, idly watching it, listening to Tony's breathing quicken.

Careful not to move, Tony said with frustration, “What’s up with you lately?”

Loki ignored the question, choosing to possessively run his fingers through Tony’s scruffy hair. “You don’t need to do the whole I was a king thing, okay? Loki?” Annoyance flared up in the man as Loki continued ignoring him. “Sorry I upset you, alright? Let’s just go back to---” The god’s pointer finger pressed into his lips.

“I have been far too indulgent with you,” Loki said. “It has made you arrogant.” He grabbed Tony’s face on both sides with his hands, leaning in, teasing as though he were going to let his lips press into Tony’s. “I shan’t make the mistake again,” he said.

“I’m not your toy,” Tony said, hearing how foolish the words were, when they were coming from between the god’s hands. He tried to shake himself away, but Loki didn’t budge. “The suit’s done, okay? You can stop worrying.” Loki frowned. He slipped one of his nails into Tony’s face again.

“Hardly,” he said, sewing it up with magic.

“I get it okay?” Tony said, hating how helpless he felt. “I’m sorry. Just stop this,” he said, trying to move away one of Loki’s arms with the back of his hand. Loki let Tony’s hand move him, but only to show Tony that he was obliging. As soon as Tony put his hand down Loki’s was back at his face.

“I believe you owe me more than an apology, Stark,” Loki said, whining the words out of the lower octaves of his throat.

Tony looked away. “I’m not in the mood,” he said. He felt his head being gently pushed side to side.

“It begins with a ‘thank’ and ends with a ‘you,’” Loki prompted him.

Tony gritted his teeth. “Thank you,” he said.

“For,” Loki said, leaning in close again.

“Not killing me?”

A sharp smile cut across Loki’s face. “Always, but try again.”

“Saving me,” Tony said.

“Very good,” Loki said, releasing him. He stood up straight. “You may spend some time thinking on how you may win back my good graces,” he said. Tony opened his mouth to protest but Loki cut him off. “That is all for you today.” He shook his head, his black hair glinting in the electronic light. “I have become far too generous in your presence,” he said.

“Loki,” Tony said, but the god was gone. His back hunched as he leaned forward, wondering with grief how he would figure this out.

The Reprieve That I Needed

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

He was running. Faster, faster, faster, but the floor was still falling out from beneath him. It collapsed, it crumbled beneath his feet, vanishing from around his flesh in waves of sand. His hands flailed out beside him, but it was too late. He was falling into the cosmos, skies and galaxies and worlds were swallowing him whole.

He became aware that there was a bird flying down beside him. A crow, he realized. Far off in the distance he spotted the second crow, at no surprise to him. Loki closed his eyes, but the crow screamed at him insistently. When he opened his eyes again he saw it flying away from him, off into the cosmos with the other bird. “Good riddance,” he muttered, still falling through the stars.

He became limp. Loki simply allowed himself to fall, to feel the wind rushing past him, tangling through his hair, flapping along his robes. The stars he watched in the distance were beautiful, but cold.

Something hard made contact with his back, jolting him out of the plunge. He whipped his head around to see, and found a metal mask. The Iron Man suit held on tight to him, and he heard Tony’s thrusters flare, rocketing them away. The dream unfurled around him and shifted, twisting and morphing into something else. Suddenly he was in Tony’s bed, but the man was absent. Looking around the room, the dream logic instantaneously informed him that the shelves, the drawers, the walls, all of them were empty, and had been for a long time now.

Loki jumped up and ran to the door, intent on searching the tower for Tony. Instead, he found Pepper in the hallway. “Stay still,” her dream self told him. There was a deep, profound pity in her eyes. “We’re the only ones left now,” she told him.

“What do you mean?” He said, though in the dream he already knew. She didn’t answer him. Instead she turned as if to leave. Though he could only see a sliver of her face, it was clear that a sorry smile graced it.

“Try not to miss me,” she said, vanishing.

“Like I’d---”

“Oh, you will,” said another voice. Loki turned to see a shadow slinking along Tony’s wall, vaguely serpentine. It moved like smoke, languidly gliding back and forth between the four corners. “Are you enjoying playing house?” It asked.

Loki tried to calm himself, but it was useless. He knew he was dreaming. It didn’t matter. “You know, you can enjoy them all you want, but you’re not really in control, are you?” The shadow purred. “You’re becoming soft.”

Loki sneered. “Hardly,” he said.

“You’re indulgent,” the shadow said. It was impossible to look away from the macabre thing, impossible to shake off its cruel voice. “Just take the man and destroy the others.”

“And what of Tony? How would Tony look at me if I killed everyone he held dear?” Loki snarled back at the shadow.

“Why should you give thought to what that mortal wants? Just take what you want. You’re the only one that matters.” The shadow snickered. “Or is befriending them what you want?”

“As though I would---“

“You wish it though, do you not? Is that not why you are still here?” The shadow peeled from the wall and drifted around Loki, circling him as it spoke. “You have renounced Asgard, you have carved a place for yourself in the Midgardian life of your lover, and you rule no one.”

“You’re wrong,” Loki said. “None of them can match me, I am at no one’s mercy. If I wish it, they will fall, they will---”

“If you wish it,” the shadow replied. “This is below your ambition. What makes you think that you can belong here? What makes you think you could enjoy an ordinary existence? You belong nowhere, Loki. No one wants us,” it whispered, squeezing him. “So we must rule them.”

Loki had nothing to say to the shadow. He awoke in his bed, and rolled over. Before he’d fallen asleep, Loki had been in good spirits. He was still angry with Tony, of course, but that anger was dissipating with the prospect of watching Tony try to win him back. Now that had all been wiped away in place of the murky jumble of left over emotion from the dream. What had it meant? Why was he dreaming about it now? Why should he even think about it? It was just a dream, after all. Still, though, perhaps the dream was right. Maybe he had let this go on too long.

Loki got up and went downstairs into the kitchen. His limbs groaned in protest as he walked into the fluorescent-lit room, sleep still tugging at his eyes. Natasha nodded in acknowledgement from the table as he entered. Turning from her, he stretched his sore arms and flipped open one of the cabinet doors. “Hard time sleeping?” Natasha asked behind him. Loki stared down at the coffee canister in his hands for a moment before answering.

“One might say that,” he said reluctantly, prying open the canister with his hand.

“I already made some,” she said, inclining her head towards the coffee pot. Loki glanced over to see that she was right. “Pour yourself a cup,” she said.

He did so, without answering her, his hands fumbling with the coffee pot as he did. Never before Tony had he consumed the odd beverage, and he found it peculiarly endearing that the group was so enchanted with the bitter taste. Loki couldn’t go without drinking it anymore.

Natasha grinned, expectantly, when he turned back around. Instinctively he wanted to leave, to rush back upstairs and try to wake up alone, to find a way to rid himself of the dream’s bad after taste on his own. But as he turned to leave, something occurred to him. Here was Agent Romanov, calmly sitting at a kitchen table with him, only a few feet away, smiling. Inviting him to sit down.

The squeal of a kitchen chair was the only sound in the room as he took her offer. Comfortably seated, he noticed that she had been in the middle of a crossword puzzle. The margins of the page were criss crossed in blue ink, evidence of a dying pen. She still had the ballpoint in her hand, poised to write. “I’ve been trying to figure it out for a while, but then I thought, I’d just ask,” Natasha said benignly.

It was difficult to read the text upside down. “I rather need a different perspective to solve your puzzle,” Loki said, reaching out to take it from her.

“Not this,” she said. His hands retreated. He folded them over in his lap, rubbing his thumb along his knuckles. “You’ve tolerated a lot more than I thought you would,” she said, tapping her pen

against the table. "Steve's team building activities," she said with a grimace, "his birthday. Dodgeball. I thought for sure we'd snap you at Pictionary, but you're still here." Her voice was devoid of malice. With a conversational rhythm she continued, "But you've surprised me. You've stuck it out."

Loki studied her face. Natasha's eyes were alert, her skin was healthy, not showing signs of sleep deprivation. In fact, she had no sign of fatigue. She had a few faint scars along her cheeks, but nothing the casual observer would notice. Her hair was cleanly set, not waved with sweat and grime as he'd seen it after a battle. In her posture there was little other than a burning curiosity that she seldom made the effort to conceal towards him.

"Look," she said, when he didn't reply. "I don't really believe that this is just about you and Thor patching things up. And I don't think it's my place to intervene. Do what you want. As long as you're not hurting anyone, it's fine." She smiled thinly, glancing down at the paper in front of her. "I enjoy teasing Clint with you. I'm alright with you being here, as you've been." He saw her eyes widen as she said it, as though she were surprising herself.

"You know I've got blood on my hands too. I've switched sides. And I've been wondering what you're after when it occurred to me. You've found something you want to hold on to. Something worth putting up with this. And I'm curious what it is." Her eyes locked onto his as she casually rested her head in her hand. "Really curious," she said.

Loki took in a long, slow breath. "Regret has been a great motivator for you, has it not?" He said, taking up his cup and drawing a long sip.

"Is this penance for you?" Natasha said, not breaking eye contact. She wasn't certain if she was playing him right or not yet.

Loki leaned back in the chair. "Is that what you think, Agent Romanov?"

"Telling me," Natasha said calmly, "is far better for you than allowing my curiosity to get the best of me."

"If you could find what you're looking for, you would not be asking me," Loki stated simply. Natasha leaned away, grinning in acknowledgement of defeat.

"An easier answer then," Natasha said. "What's troubling you this morning?" Loki glanced away from her, and she seized on it. "Come on, it's written all over you."

"I think I may have preferred your interrogations when there was a wall of glass between us," Loki said.

Natasha nodded her head to the side. "Really? Because you lost that one."

"True," Loki said. "It won't happen again."

"Oh I doubt that," Natasha said, returning to her crossword puzzle. The two sat together quietly for a while longer. With the refrigerator humming in the background and the coffee going cold, Loki watched her fill in the spaces with different letters. It wasn't until he tried correcting one of her guesses that she kicked him out, suggesting that he go wreak havoc on someone else's day. Significantly happier, he took her suggestion, but only after using magic to correct the page. He laughed when he felt the pen she'd been holding hit his back after being thrown in a fit of annoyance.

Tony had enjoyed the best shower and restful sleep that he'd had in a long time. His fights with Loki and Pepper plus the week spent in the lab had taken their toll. When he woke up in the morning he felt infinitely better than he had all week.

As his mind cleared, he realized that the person he wanted to talk to the most was not Pepper or Loki, but Bruce. He had become distant with Bruce lately. His outrage over Loki and Bruce meeting together had not helped things.

Tony invited his friend down into the lab, to check out the new suit first.

"This is, uh," Bruce turned the Iron Man suit's arm over. "Really something," he said.

"Check out the OS," Tony said with pride, bringing up some of the programming onto a monitor for his friend to see. The astonishment on Bruce's face was worth it. If Tony could impress Bruce, well, he knew he'd achieved something. And it was so nice to have someone else appreciate what a feat the suit actually was.

"Have you taken this thing out for a test drive yet?" Bruce asked.

Tony shook his head. "It hasn't been out of the lab yet. It's ready though." He grinned mischievously.

"Tony," Bruce said. "This is fantastic," he said, as though stating the obvious. Tony didn't notice the line of worry on his brow. "Do you, uh, feel better now?"

"I feel great," Tony said, ignoring the severity of Bruce's question. He poured his attention into the screens beside him.

"Good, because we'll be glad to have you back," Bruce said, sitting down. Waiting. He knew he could get Tony to talk if he just waited long enough. For a while Tony chatted, telling Bruce about how he'd engineered the updates in the suit, letting Bruce ask questions. It was somewhat abrupt when Tony brought up what he really wanted to talk about.

"How're those meetings with Loki going," Tony said, trying to make his voice as level as possible, his body turned away from Bruce and towards a screen.

"Fine," Bruce said. "I've been able to make a few medical advancements thanks to them."

"Why do you think he's willing to do that?" Tony said.

"Help?" Bruce said. "I don't think he really sees it as helping," the man said in his gentle, articulated way. "It's just an exchange."

Tony sat down close to Bruce, engaging. "What's he get out of the exchange?"

"Honestly?" Bruce said. He shrugged, smiling dismissively. "Not much. The questions are weird, and I've spent hours just sitting with him, talking. Do you know what everyone's current theory on the meetings is?"

Bruce waited for Tony to nod his head or ask, but it took Tony a second to respond. Tony had realized what it was that Loki was getting out of his meetings with Bruce. Tony was jealous. Bruce was spending hours talking to Loki one on one, and it was making him jealous.

"What?" Tony asked. "What's everyone think?"

“That he’s just insane,” Bruce said, grinning. He had meant it lightly.

“He’s not insane, just calculated,” Tony said, crossing his arms. Bruce had not intended for him to turn so serious.

“Hey,” he said. “I know this has gone on longer than any of us planned. I know it’s surreal to have Loki living here. Okay? I never would have pictured this. Ever. But we are getting some benefits out of it. You being alive, for instance,” Bruce said, his voice dropping down softer.

Tony frowned. “I’ve got a better suit now,” he said. “I won’t let it happen again.”

“That doesn’t change that it did happen,” Bruce said.

“Don’t tell me you’re on my case too,” Tony said brashly. “I’ve already got Pepper and--- I don’t need another person after me.”

“I’m not on your case,” Bruce said. “I’m trying to say we were worried about you, Tony. And I’m glad you’re okay and if Loki’s what it took for that to happen, then fine.”

Tony shook his head. “So the team is warming up to him then?”

“Yeah,” Bruce said after a moment’s consideration. “I guess you could say that. But we’re not giving him a free pass, if that’s what you mean.”

“Okay,” Tony said.

“Aren’t you sick of looking at this lab?” Bruce said. “Let’s get out of here. I haven’t had lunch yet.”

“That,” Tony said, “Is the best thing I’ve heard all day.”

Chapter End Notes

This took a little longer to put up than I wanted, but developments are on their way. ;) Particularly for Loki, the little trouble maker. I'm super curious for the Dark World release trailer and Iron Man 3.

That Which I Can Put Aside

Tony brushed his hand down along her hair, smoothing it down. He closed his eyes and kissed her forehead as the elevator glided up the tower. Pepper leaned forward against his chest. Her feet were killing her in high heels. They had returned from a night fundraising, followed by several hours at a rooftop bar. Pepper's cheeks were flushed and she was quietly giggling to herself. "Come on," Tony said, leaning down and scooping her up. Limply her head fell against his chest and she muttered something that he could not decipher. He grinned, shaking his head and holding her close. The elevator lurched to a halt.

The thirteenth floor indicator lit and the doors chimed open.

Tony saw his feet first. Pausing for a heartbeat before stepping forward, the sound his footfall made reverberated through the elevator like a gong. Instinctively Tony held Pepper closer, leaning back against the elevator wall.

The god wore heavy black boots, gray Midgardian jeans, and a loosely knit olive top. His hair was down, its slick black locks resting over against his shoulders. When Tony made eye contact with him he felt his heart drop. Loki's eyes were intense, burning into him, but his expression remained neutral. Tony moved aside so that Loki could select a floor button. He leaned over, brushing his hand along Tony's side as he reached over.

Tony glanced down to see that Pepper had fallen asleep. He did not feel the tiny smile of adoration that turned up his lips as he gazed down at her. Loki leaned back against the elevator wall opposite Tony, his arms propped against the bar there. He studied Tony callously.

It was a while before the man of iron returned his attention to the god. "You, uh, keeping busy?" Tony asked, breaking the silence first. Loki shrugged and looked away, watching the floor lights flicker instead. "We had a fundraising event, things went well. Nat told me you had a thing for crossword puzzles? Want me to pick you up one? I never see you leave."

"She has cut her foot," Loki said, ignoring Tony's questioning. He turned his head away again, his jaw tightly set.

Tony shifted Pepper in his arms to see, but she mumbled something and began to wake. He stopped. They were almost to her floor. He could check then. "Thanks," Tony said anyway. Loki said nothing, but Tony imagined that he was thinking something scathing about how fragile they all were.

Truth be told, Tony had not had much time to ruminate on a way to fix things with Loki. His afternoon with Bruce had folded into leaving for the night with Pepper. The elevator stopped. "I'll, uh, be seeing you soon," Tony said, pausing for a moment before leaving Loki. The deity remained motionless as the man stepped past and onto Pepper's floor.

Tony carried Pepper over to her bed. He pulled back the thick, fluffy comforter and laid her on the sheets. Loki had been right. There was a gash on her heel along the top where a strap had cut in. Gently, Tony eased off the offending footwear.

He walked into her bathroom to find a bandage. It was bright, with a large bathtub and beautiful tiled floor. There was a shelf on the wall with a few potted plants and then, Tony noticed, the mounted arc reactor with "Proof Tony Stark Has a Heart" engraved beneath it. When had she put it there?

He opened a drawer and pulled out a box of bandages. Pepper had turned over in the bed when he returned to the room. Gingerly he lifted her foot, slicking first aid ointment across the cut and pressing down the adhesive bandage.

Not wanting to wake her again, he pulled the comforter up and around her. She smiled faintly in her sleep. He sat down beside her and for a while he watched her peacefully before his thoughts insistently crept in again. What would he do about Loki?

Had Loki meant it? About being ruled? Or had he just been angry? What was he expecting Tony to do for him? Tony absently felt along his cheek where the scratches had been.

In Tony's defense, he had not intended to hear the conversation that morning. He had only happened to be in the kitchen when Steve and Thor began talking about it. Tony leaned back against the counter, subconsciously attempting to be invisible, listening intently. The other two seemed oblivious to him in the heat of their debate.

"I know not what occurred between now and then," Thor was saying. "We were not watching for him, we thought him dead."

"Do you think whatever it was is reversible though?" Steve asked. "Do you think it's reversing now?"

Thor considered that for a while before answering. "Something has changed, but I cannot say what it is."

"What was he like before? When you were growing up?"

Thor smiled faintly, glancing up. "He was not so unkind. He loved our family dearly. Had he not loved us so, I do not think he would have reacted as deeply he did. I do not believe he would have brought his troubles to your planet," Thor said, guilt flecked across his words.

"We got into a lot of trouble with Sif and the warriors three, but he could always get us out of it," Thor's expression brightened as he remembered something else. "We depended on Loki getting the five of us out of many scrapes, actually."

"Though," Thor said, "his memory of events has changed. He greets everything with contempt. There is no grace in his recollection of our childhood. His anger has spoilt whatever joy may have been there."

Steve nodded. "That's a shame," he said gently. "But you still hope he can become that person again?"

"I believe that part of him lives within him still," Thor said. "It is deep within, but I believe it is there, yes. I do not any longer believe that he can return to who he was," Thor said mournfully. "But I believe he is not lost entirely to the darkness."

"Does Loki believe that?" Steve asked.

"No," Thor said. "I do not think so."

"He's lucky," Steve said.

"What do you mean?" Thor asked.

“To have you looking out for him still. Not a lot of people would do that.”

Bashfully, the god looked away. “Perhaps,” he said, glancing down. “He is still my responsibility.”

“No he’s not,” Steve said decisively, ending the conversation. Thor and Steve had returned to eating when Tony interrupted them.

“You can’t just change Loki,” Tony said, his gaze trained on Steve. “You can’t just make him some hero.” Tony crossed his arms anxiously. He shouldn’t be saying anything, but here he was. “You have to accept Loki’s darkness if you’re going to accept him at all.”

“How would you know?” Steve said dismissively. “It’s not like you’ve been trying to help us figure out his move in, you can’t even accept that he saved your life.”

“I’ve accepted it,” Tony said, anger flaring up. “What I haven’t accepted is that you think Loki’s something you need to fix. Like you’re just going to press a reset button on him. He’s not broken.”

“Tony, my brother is in need of help. He is scarred and not the one he once was,” Thor said incredulously. Did Tony really think that he knew his brother better? Tony had not grown up with him.

“But he’s not broken,” Tony said.

Steve rolled his eyes as he looked away. “Don’t get involved, Tony.”

“And why shouldn’t I?”

“Because you don’t know what you’re talking about,” Steve said. “You’ve avoided him the entire time he’s been here. So yeah, you shouldn’t get involved.”

The look in Tony’s eyes scared Thor. He had seen that look before, in the eyes of others, and it was never good. “I appreciate your kindness,” Thor said, trying to calm the situation. “I am grateful for your faith in my brother.”

“Don’t call someone broken and cast them aside,” Tony said. “Not in my tower,” he said, walking away. He had left before Thor and Steve looked at each other.

“Probably hit a nerve about himself,” Steve said irritably. Thor didn’t answer.

Tony stopped the elevator. He needed a moment to think. Steve’s accusatory eyes blared in his mind. He fervently wished that he could tell Steve just how wrong he was, but that would blow the whole thing. He wasn’t about to tell the captain that he’d been sleeping with their new resident.

It hurt. It scratched and clawed at Tony’s chest to hear them speak about Loki as though the god needed rescuing. He bit his lip. Did Loki know what was said about him among the other residents?

Of course he did, Tony thought. Loki could, and often did, figure out everything. Yet he had said nothing. Maybe he didn’t care. Tony glanced over at the buttons on the wall. He had been angry with Loki, too, though. He wasn’t about to let the god walk all over him. Yet it wrenched his heart to see clearly, for the first time, what Loki was tolerating to be close to him. It felt awful. Tony felt, perhaps irrationally, as though it were his fault.

This had started as a whim, how had it gotten so complicated?

Tony knew what Loki truly wanted, and that made it difficult to be angry.

Tony just needed him to know that he was wanted.

That, he realized as he pressed the thirteenth floor button, was his downfall.

When the doors opened he saw his lover reclined back on the sofa, reading a book and twirling magic around his fingertips. The little flickers of runes dissipated when Tony walked in, but Loki did not look up from his book. "I hope you have dedicated good thought to your next move," Loki said. He turned a page.

Tony walked over and plucked the book from his hands. Cat-like, Loki glared up at him.

Tony couldn't say it. He couldn't fucking say it. But he didn't need to. Loki never had.

Dropping the book, Tony climbed over him, bracing his arms against Loki's shoulders, keeping his chest up. "Stark," Loki said. He was tense, but he did not push Tony off of him.

"You offered to bring me to your floor, and you never did," Tony said. "So I came instead."

Loki reached up and brushed his hand along Tony's face. "Not following rules already," Loki said simply. "Did I not tell you I will not be indulging your whims?"

"Then how about I indulge yours," Tony grinned. A smirk broke from Loki's mouth, but he stared pointedly away. "Please," Tony whispered, relaxing his arms and slowly grinding down against him.

"Don't you have someone else to attend to?" Loki said, pressing back against Tony's chest with his hand.

"Loki," Tony said, "don't push me away."

"I will do whatever I please, Stark," Loki said, easily pushing Tony off of him and standing. Tony stared up at him from the sofa, not bothering to sit up from where Loki had pushed him.

There was something unsettling in Tony's stare, some intensity of thought that Loki did not want to engage with. "Is this neediness, Stark?" Loki said, turning his back.

"That's not charming," Tony said, sitting up.

"Who said I want to charm you?" Loki retorted.

"Why do you have to make this difficult?" Tony said. "I am trying to---"

"I'm making it difficult?" Loki said, spinning back around. "No, it is you, Tony, that makes this difficult."

"I am doing everything I can!" Tony said. "I came up here for you, Loki! What gives?" Tony stood up from the sofa. "What are you so fucking angry about?"

Loki tilted his head to the side, turning his lips up in a mirthless smile. Tony stepped in close to him. "You don't get to play this game with me," Tony said.

"Don't I," Loki said. He blinked slowly, grinning again. The shadows peeled from the walls,

encircling the two of them. Tony grabbed around his waist, clasping his arms together with the god between them.

“No, you don’t,” Tony said, undeterred. The shadows screamed, their soulless screeches peeling the warmth from Tony’s blood. Shivering, he pressed against Loki. “You don’t need to show off for me,” Tony said, smirking.

“You’re not in control here, Stark,” Loki said. The shadows screamed louder. “You are mine,” he said, stroking Tony’s face.

“Then you’re mine too,” Tony said. He felt the being in his arms tense as Loki’s eyes widened for a heartbeat. “And I’d like you to drop this,” Tony said, gesturing towards the shadows. “Loki,” he said firmly. “Drop it.”

“Cease your commanding,” Loki said. “I will not have it.”

“No,” Tony said. “You will. You will hear me. If you want me, you will hear me.”

“Is this a bid for control?” Loki asked. Tony felt his tension loosen just a smidge.

“I’m not trying to rule you Loki,” Tony said. “I’m trying to be with you.”

The shadows turned gray, though their screaming did not quell. Tony began to shiver violently. He clung to Loki, his eyes like fire even as his body shook. Loki drew in a long, long breath. Tony’s arms were tightly wrapped around him, immovable. Loki ran his hand down through Tony’s hair, bringing it to rest at the back of Tony’s head, holding the shaking man. “This is by the grace of my mercy,” he said, releasing the shadows. The room returned to normal.

“Whatever you need to call it,” Tony said, as the last shiver shook free of his body. Heat seeped in again. He did not let go. “It’s gonna take more than that,” Tony said, “to make me want you to leave here.”

Loki cradled Tony’s head, shifting it side to side, ardently searching for something as he frowned in concentration. “You’re mine,” Tony said, grinning Loki’s favorite devil-may-care grin.

“You’re delusional,” Loki said. He let go of Tony’s head.

Tony reached up Loki’s back, forcing him to bend down to Tony’s height. “You’re mine,” Tony repeated. He ravenously stole a kiss before Loki could contradict him. His hands pressed hard into Loki’s back as he parted the god’s lips, letting his tongue slide across the sharp teeth beyond. Tony held on tight, as if it were the only moment he had ever lived, desperate to take the lead before Loki could snap to and take power again. Loki’s shoulders were tense beneath his fingers and he kneaded them in, feeling the god’s breath, shallow and still, unyielding, in his mouth. Tony’s left hand wandered around to Loki’s throat and pressed gently down it, down into Loki’s shirt, where his thumb rubbed down against Loki’s collarbone. He bit Loki’s lip before pulling away and freeing the trickster’s mouth.

“Stark,” Loki said. One of his arms had wrapped around Tony’s back. The other hung limply at his side. His tongue slid across the tender skin where Tony had bit him. Tony could feel Loki’s heart beating faster where their chests met.

“Give in to me,” Tony said, impersonating Loki’s domineering demeanor perfectly. He could see the god’s pupils dilating. It was the mind that he had to reach. “You’re---“

“Mine,” Loki said, his venomous voice sucking the word from Tony. He grinned darkly. “You.

Are. Mine,” he growled, taking Tony’s head again with his free hand and bending the man’s head to the side. He trailed his lips down Tony’s neck, savoring the shuddered breaths Tony made as he sucked hard at the delicate skin there. He shoved Tony back a few feet, knocking the man down onto the sofa.

“I’m sorry,” Tony said, his breathing getting faster, “what did you say?”

“Shut up,” Loki said, crawling on top of Tony to pin him down against the sofa.

“What?” Tony smirked.

“Shut up,” Loki snarled. Violently he ripped Tony’s shirt up off over his head and tossed it aside. Tony’s full attention was his now, and he used it to slowly peel his own shirt off, exposing the pale flesh below. As his raven hair fell down over his bare shoulders, his smirk was self-congratulatory. Tony’s face was flushing with lust. Loki ran his pointer finger down the thickening hair that trailed down Tony’s stomach, pushing down into the skin. He stopped at the belt buckle. Loki tapped his nail along the metal. “Ask,” he said.

“I thought I was supposed to shut up,” Tony said. Loki rubbed at the belt buckle, assuredly staring down at the man. “Fine,” Tony said as Loki’s hand wandered down to his hard cock, rubbing against his jeans. Tony’s breath caught. “Shit, okay, please,” he said, rolling his eyes with the last word. Loki ripped the belt from him as though it were a loose string. Unhinging the top jean button, he dragged the zipper down as slowly as he could will himself to manage. “Would you just fucking magic the process along,” Tony whined.

Loki vanished his own attire but left Tony untouched. “Actually, I liked it better when you shut up,” Loki said. Tony rolled his eyes again. He slipped his own hands into his jeans to pry them off, but Loki would not accommodate him. Tony felt a fire prickling up through his skin and watched in awe as the fabric burned away, leaving his skin with little more than a fond impression of heat.

“How long have you been saving that party trick,” Tony said, now bare beneath him.

“Not long enough,” Loki replied, parting Tony’s legs wider. “Now as you are mine, you will be shutting up,” he said, leaning down against Tony’s ear. “Unless it is to scream my name.”

Tony made to laugh but his mouth was forced open, the god’s hot tongue silencing him. He returned the bite that Tony had left him. “I mean it,” Loki said. He thrust his thick cock into Tony, knocking the words out of him. The man’s hands fumbled for a grip, settling for twisting into the sofa as his eyes flickered close while Loki pushed in and out, enjoying the little contortions it pulled from Tony’s face. The man was trying to regulate his breathing, to slow down the build up. He was caught between pain and pleasure, a prickling feeling pointing into him with each of Loki’s calculated thrusts. He knew the god could hold out far longer than he, but he would be damned if he didn’t try.

“Give into me,” Loki said, throwing Tony’s earlier words back at him. Tony grinned, not opening his eyes. The head of the god’s thick cock was hitting his prostrate with each thrust in and out, in and out, and Loki was in no hurry. Tony could feel the little sofa fabric that he could grasp between his clenched fingers dampening with sweat.

Loki leaned down and sucked at the crook of Tony’s neck, brushing down against the man’s hard cock as he did. “Come for me,” he said, arcing back up and thrusting in hard. Tony groaned loudly, digging his nails down into the sofa, refusing to give in. The god thrust harder, just so he could hear Tony moan. His fingertips sunk into the man’s hips, certain to leave bruises. “Come for me,” he purred.

Tony didn't answer. His lips were twitching in that way he got when Loki knew he was close. Loki wouldn't allow himself to come until he saw Tony give in. A bead of sweat rolled down his cheeks. Tony was desperate to hold out and Loki delighted in watching the drama unfold. Tony moaned loudly again, his back arching up towards Loki. He thrust again, harder, drawing a loud, obscene groan from Tony. "Come," Loki said, thrusting again. Tony shook, digging his fingers down hard into the couch again, groaning. In spite of himself, Tony moaned, his resolve breaking down. With one more thrust from the god those lips of Tony's twitched together into an O. All of Tony's thoughts seeped right from his mind as he came. It was his frenzied breath that snatched him from oblivion and returned him to awareness. Above him Loki had allowed himself to come, enraptured with the sight of Tony unraveled beneath him by the god's own making. The orgasm had shot through his cock and he had grinned in a soft way as he let go that Tony had missed seeing. Tony was shuddering harder than Loki was, and he had absently wrapped one of his arms back around Loki's bare back. He closed his eyes, listening to the sound of the two of them gasping together, shakily making their way back to ordinary.

It was some time before Loki looked down at him and said, "You are mine."

"You're mine," Tony said, only arguing half-heartedly.

Loki stood to go take a shower. "Shut up," he said, smiling intimately. He considered the man for a moment, and then, Tony found himself sitting fully dressed in nightclothes on the sofa. Physically spent, but remade, he leaned back against the sofa and watched Loki's naked ass disappear into the bathroom. The god's skin was flushed and Tony could make out a long trail of pink scratches down his pale back.

Tony fell asleep on the sofa. He didn't know how much time had passed when Loki woke him up. "Nice hair," he said, marveling at the curly, air dried locks. He reached out to brush them back over Loki's shoulder.

"You should sleep in a bed," Loki said. "Being the fragile mortal that you are."

"Yeah?" Tony said, noticing that there was a light peeking out from behind the ajar bedroom door.

"I'm not going to carry you," Loki said, walking away. He opened the bedroom door and eased into bed, closing his eyes but listening expectantly. A minute later he heard the man's footsteps pad in along the floor. Tony pulled back the sheets on the other side of the bed, curling in. Within minutes they had both fallen asleep.

The Heart That Beats for Me

Loki awoke in the middle of the night. He rolled over to see that Tony was still asleep, his face pinched in an unpleasant dream. The arc reactor in his chest was the only illumination in the otherwise bleak, dark room. How Loki had longed for this. He closed his eyes again and listened to Tony's steady breathing, like a clock keeping time.

He had let Tony sleep on the couch for a while that night before coming to wake him. At first he had crawled into his own bed, stubbornly lying alone in the dark. Yet knowing that Tony was in the room outside, just within reach, he could not sleep. If he had the choice, he did not want his bed to be empty.

Not any longer. He had come to accept that.

It was Tony. It had to be Tony. He hated it, but he pined for it, and giving in was so much sweeter than holding out. Some days he denied it, some days he insisted to himself that this was just another of his whims and it would pass soon, and some days he stopped lying to himself. He would have Tony until the mortal's heart gave out, he assured himself.

Loki reached across the bed, running his hand down Tony's arm. It was just enough to assure the man, to free him from his nightmare. His face relaxed. Loki sighed, his tired breath drifting soundlessly across the satin pillow. What would the world say if it knew he was so infatuated with a mortal?

In the safe silence of the night, it was easy for Loki to accept Tony. The other man was his then, by his side without quarrel. It was so much harder in their waking hours.

Tony frowned in his sleep again, flinching. He muttered something, his deep voice cracking with discontentment. His eyes twitched, then he shifted, the sheets in the bed whispering as he turned over. Unable to see the man's face any longer, Loki rolled over onto his back and closed his eyes. He wondered what Tony was dreaming. Perhaps he should wander into the mortal's dreams and see. No, Loki thought, he would rather not. He did not want to know what troubled the man. He did not want to wander into the dreamscape and find Tony fighting something, or injured or... he could not leave Tony to his own devices. The man was destructive and impulsive and unstable and if Loki wanted the man for himself, well, he would have to control that part of Tony.

Really, what would the world say of him now if it saw him flustering over this mortal? If it saw him leading this life? Loki had meant to destroy the tower, to take his prize and leave. He had not intended to stay so long. He had not intended to enjoy staying. Not at all. He had not intended to enjoy contending with Pepper, or provoking Clint, or watching Bruce squirm at his questioning as dearly as he had. He was almost envious of Tony, for having such an enjoyable, mundane existence.

And he was furious with himself for it. This was not supposed to be happening to him. He was above this sort of sentimentality. He was. He was, he was, he was.

Sleep returned hesitantly, like a deer from the woods.

Loki stood in the center of concrete spires, skyscrapers towering above him, burning black against a clouded sky. White ash fell down around him, softly landing on his armor. He reached his hand out to find a scepter there, glowing blue with power. Ash spotted his arm as it continued to drift down from the burning, gray sky. Howling broke the silence. A shrieking scream pierced right

through his reverie, a jettison of pure terror signaling out like a flare.

He ran to the sound as fast as his legs could carry him. Not for the victim, but to see the cause.

Yards away he saw a flash of red and gold cut through the downy gray. He ran, the scepter brushing against his side with each pace. Turning a corner, he came upon the alleyway that the red flash had headed towards, where the scream had rung out from. Loki froze.

In the center of the alley was a massive chitauri, its hulking flesh wrapped around the body of a tiny child. The Iron Man suit hovered feet away, unable to move, clearly conflicted. The child was crying, its face bright red, covered in tears. Loki knew it was a trap, it was the most obvious, pitiful of traps, and Tony was going to fall into it. Because he was kind. As Loki thought this with rage, he saw Tony land on the ground and put his hands up. The chitauri grunted something, and in the next moment Tony was slammed back against the alley wall, crumpling to the ground. His body doubled over, helpless. Loki heard his own scream rattle the air, and in the next he was hurtling forward, intent upon maliciously destroying the creature, but in the moment before he made contact the chitauri and the child vanished.

He heard the clink of the Iron Man suit behind him. Ever so slowly he turned, his lip snarling up in anger. Tony had taken off the faceplate. "Where's the kid?" He said, standing up.

"There was no child," Loki said.

Tony looked past him, certain of himself. "Where'd it go?" He said, already planning his next course of action. "We have to get that kid."

"There was no child!" Loki screamed. He pushed Tony back against the alley wall. "There was never a child, you stupid, foolish little man! Can't you see when you're being manipulated?" Tony turned away, and Loki only pushed back harder. He felt the metal crumple in his hands, but in his rage he could not care. "Why would you walk into something so obvious? Why would you endanger your life for something so trivial?"

"Loki," Tony said. "Saving people is kinda my thing. That's what I'm here for. Calm down." He grinned, brushing it off.

"Do not tell me to calm down!" He had pinned both of Tony's arms against the wall, and he could feel the metal crumple without protest between his fingers. "What do you think you're doing? What did I tell you?!"

"Loki," Tony said. The man's head dropped down.

"What did I tell you?!" The man did not answer. Loki looked down Tony's body. His hands went limp. Blood slicked his palms from where he had crushed the Iron Man suit. "Tony?" The man's eyes had closed. "Tony!" He shook the man, but no response came. Magic leapt from his fingertips and into the body in front of him. There was nothing for the magic to repair. Tony was dead.

Loki's heart hammered against his chest. Scarlet red blood slicked his fingertips. He looked at the body on the ground, at the scepter he had dropped in his effort to control Tony. He leaned down, unable to look at or touch Tony's body. It was his fault. He had killed the man. He picked up the scepter.

"Is this what you go through at night?"

Loki turned around. Tony stood leaning against the corner of the alleyway, a thick coat of ash in his hair. "I have to say it's not exactly my idea of a dream," Tony said with wry humor. "So what

happens next?” Loki wiped the blood off on his armor.

“How much did you see?” Loki asked, his eyes focused towards the ground.

Tony leaned off the wall, stepping towards him. “Crying kid, you running forward, the whole screaming bit. I have to say, it was not your best performance.” He closed in on the god. “Loki,” he said, serious and determined, “tell me what that was about.” Tony reached out and grabbed the scepter from Loki. He was surprised that the god did not fight him, and just let his arm fall back at his side. Tony tossed the scepter over on the ground. “Come on,” he said.

“It’s nothing.”

“That,” Tony said, gesturing over towards his dead body double, “was not nothing.” He wanted to joke, to say that his doppelganger was far more chiseled than his actual self, that Loki must have a fantasized idea of him. Yet, seeing it was too jarring, too somber to joke. “You’ve gotta tell me what this is,” Tony said.

“It’s a nightmare,” Loki said. “You crossed the dreamscape into one of my nightmares,” he said, shifting into an academic tone.

Loki wasn’t going to give it up. Tony decided to take a shot at forcing his hand instead. “What’s the fear here?” He said. “Is it my death, because I told you, I’ve done everything I can to fix that suit.” Loki didn’t answer. “Is it another invasion?”

“It’s that I could kill you!” Loki snapped, broken by his impatience. “True, there are many a wicked, loathsome thing in this universe, but none so immediately threatening to one so fragile as yourself as me!” He couldn’t move, or look at Tony. If he ran in the dream he would only wake up to find Tony lying beside him in bed.

He did not see Tony soften, or the shy, humbled smile that flickered across his lips before his usual bravado took over. “You threw me out of a window once, and I’m fine.”

Loki rolled his eyes. “This is most decidedly not fine. You should never have seen this dream. I should peel it from your memory when you awake.”

“Why?” Tony asked. “Because you’re afraid?”

“Because I am a god,” Loki said loudly, “and I am not meant to fear the demise of others. I should revel in my capacity, and yet, here you stand as witness to my pitiful weakness. You, Tony Stark, make me vulnerable, and I should end you. And yet before you, you see that doing so is a nightmare to me.” His hands balled into tight fists, the nails digging down into his palms in slender red crescents. “This is loathsome,” he spat.

Tony shook his head, more for himself than Loki. A heavy smile lifted his lips. “Quit fighting it. You’ve got feelings for me, okay? You want to be with me. You want this life. I’ve known it since the day you showed up in my office wearing my old t-shirt, Loki.”

A tutted breath leapt from his lungs, but Loki did not stir to argue. Tony pressed on. “I know this isn’t what you planned for when you went in, but guess what? Neither was I. But shit, I feel it too. The only difference is I’m not lying about it.”

“God of lies,” Loki said, gesturing to himself with a flat palm. He wanted to derail Tony’s speech, to remind Tony of just how wicked he was so that the man would cease talking and doubt himself instead. Tony did none of those.

“Yeah, you’re vulnerable,” Tony said, recognizing the lilt in his voice as something he’d learned from Pepper, “but that’s part of being with someone else. Not just sleeping with them, not yanking them around, but being with them. And it’s not a bad thing. Look, I know you could happily eat my face off with a fork or throw me out a window or suffocate me with your freakish ghost army or one of the million other creepy shit things you’re into. I know that, Loki.” Hesitantly, Tony reached out his hand, knowing absolutely that whatever happened next would dictate whatever was to come. His hand made contact, slipping under Loki’s hung head and lifting it up to face Tony. “I still want you,” Tony said softly. “I want you and I want you to admit that you want me.”

From beneath heavy lids Loki’s lucid green eyes stared into Tony, exposed. “Of course I want you,” he said, his voice devoid of pretense.

“Then you won’t hurt me, and this will stay a nightmare,” Tony promised, letting his hand fall to rest on Loki’s shoulder. “You don’t have to fight.”

Tony felt two warm hands circle back around his waist and pull him in tight. As they held him securely, he could practically feel Loki contemplating his answer. The god took his time, considering. Then Tony felt a hot, searing breath brushed down along his ear. “You will tell no one of this, Tony Stark,” Loki said. He stroked Tony’s ash slicked hair, the blood from his hands mixing, creating a messy paste. “This will stay between us,” he said.

“Don’t blow the cover of the god of mischief’s soft side, got it,” Tony said, grinning. Loki remained serious. He tilted Tony back with his arms, insinuating his unmatched physical strength.

“I will not allow the world to have you,” Loki said with absolute resolution. Tony released all of his weight onto the god to find that it made no difference. Loki held him still, his fierce, whispered voice still clawing into Tony. “And I will decide how that is to be done.”

The man closed his eyes. He knew Loki would throw a power tantrum sometime later in the week to compensate for feeling exposed. Then he would get over it, and return to his usual scheming, and Tony would be left to navigate the chaos left behind in Loki’s messy emotional wake. Tony also knew that he had won this battle.

Loki leaned down over him, and though Tony felt much like prey held by a spider, trapped by limbs on all sides, he also felt relief. There was nothing he could do to escape the god’s grip, and in a harrowing way, that was comforting. Right past the beginning of his hairline he felt a pair of familiar lips press, privately, intimately. Loki brought his chin to rest on Tony’s head, and remained there quietly for a while before speaking. Tony seized the opportunity to breathe in the god’s scent, to be held by him in a moment of rare tranquility. “You will tell no one of this,” Loki stated again, and Tony could feel the adam’s apple in Loki’s throat skip up against his forehead as he said it.

“If I’m going to make that promise,” Tony said, “I think we might have to consummate the deal.” A low rumble of agreement reverberated in the chest pressed against him as Loki faintly laughed.

“That can be arranged,” he said.

The Challenge That I Saved for You

“It is not a matter that I can delay,” he said. “I have duties that must be fulfilled.”

“I think we can handle it,” Clint said, glancing back at Natasha. She glared straight ahead, contemplating the situation. Clint grinned at Thor reassuringly. “Go ahead and go,” he said.

“Are you going to tell Loki that you’re leaving?” Natasha asked.

Thor shrugged. “He will know whether I inform him or not.” She nodded her head to the side in acknowledgement. His tense shoulders hunched forward as he crossed his arms. “But I must see to my obligations. I will take responsibility for anything that occurs, and you may send for me if something should happen.”

“See you in a few weeks then?” Natasha asked.

Thor nodded and turned to leave. When he had vanished Clint glanced back to her. “It’s gotta suck being Loki’s babysitter.”

“What were the chances of getting extraterrestrial royalty? It would’ve been easier if they’d both been soldiers or something,” Natasha said.

“It sounds weird when you put it like that,” Clint said.

“We deal in weird,” Natasha replied. “Hey, want take bets on how long it takes Loki to find out and raise hell?”

“No,” Clint said. “I don’t want to be right.”

Upstairs, Loki’s thoughts were far from his brother’s departure. He was not aware of Thor’s absence yet, not that it would occupy him nearly as much as the suspicious assassins seemed to think.

He was far more interested in the man whose sleeping arm was draped over him. Loki was hot and uncomfortable, but not enough to break away from Tony just yet. He kicked the sheets away from him, chill air greeting his bare skin. A snore rattled the room. Enough of that. Loki pulled away and out of the bed.

Slipping away and into the shower, he stayed in the steam filled room for a long time before stepping back out. He let his wet hair drip over his shoulders, electing to let it air dry while he got dressed and helped himself to breakfast.

It was hours before Tony woke up, stumbling out of the bedroom with unruly hair and bags under his eyes. “I have design plans I was supposed to finish today,” he said, pulling up a pair of pants as he headed towards the elevator. Tony stopped at the armchair Loki was sitting in. “Back to the 80’s hair band look again,” he said, grinning.

“I do hope that you did not intend for me to understand that reference,” Loki said.

“Ask Steve. You can both look it up,” Tony said with playful detachment. He walked away and pressed the elevator button. Loki shook his head, a thin grin on his lips. “Later,” Tony said,

stepping in past the opening doors.

Pepper and Bruce joined Tony about halfway through the building. They had been speaking in hushed, hurried tones when the doors had opened.

“Tony,” Bruce said, stepping off into the corner of the elevator. “Thor’s out on some sort of royal duty in Asgard.”

“How long?” Tony asked casually.

“A few weeks,” Pepper answered.

“Well I hope he brings back souvenirs,” Tony said. “Do you think they have knick knacks that say ‘Asgard’ on them?”

“Why don’t you ask Loki,” Pepper said.

“I’d prefer not to,” Bruce answered, assuming that the statement was directed at him. He smiled bashfully. “I might have to pay extra for a question like that.”

“Tell Loki it’ll come out of his rent,” Tony said.

Bruce grinned, looking away and up towards the ceiling. “Yeah, I’d like to see how that’d go over.”

“We should charge rent,” Pepper said as the elevator came to a halt. “Starting with Tony,” she said, smiling.

“I think my charming debonair is enough to pay rent with,” Tony said, stepping out after her.

Bruce let the elevator doors close, leaving the two alone.

He felt his phone buzz in his pocket. It was a text from Natasha. There would be a team meeting in a few hours. Putting the phone away, Bruce let out a heavy sigh. It seemed that the team would be on high alert for a while.

“Now that Thor isn’t here,” Natasha said, late that afternoon, “we need to reevaluate our stance on Loki.”

Bruce, Steve, Clint, and Tony were all in attendance around the common room. Tony looked particularly sullen as he leaned back in his armchair.

“You want to change the rules on where he can go?” Steve asked.

“No,” Natasha said. “I just want to discuss what he’s still doing here.”

“I think our obligation to Thor’s over,” Clint said. “We’ve let Loki stay, and he avoids Thor like the plague. That relationship isn’t going anywhere. We need to ask ourselves what he’s really doing here.”

“Just because he’s not out making daisy chains with Thor doesn’t mean something’s not happening. We don’t know,” Tony said. “I don’t think we should upset the guy. Thor’s got a lot on his plate. And anyway, this little meeting while he’s out,” Tony frowned. “Super not cool.”

“Thor’s completely biased on the issue,” Clint said. “We’re not asking him.”

“That’s not fair,” Steve said. “And they have talked. I think they’re making progress. We can’t give up yet.”

“I’m sick of playing mediator for those two,” Clint said.

“You’re not the one mediating anything,” Steve said.

“You know what I mean,” Clint said.

Before Steve could argue back Bruce had something to say. “If I might,” he said calmly, “for whatever reason he’s here, I am getting something useful out of him. He has access to all kinds of information. It’s valuable.”

“Why can’t we just get that out of Thor?” Clint asked.

“Thor didn’t think we were capable of handling the tesseract,” Bruce said. “He has moral qualms about giving up advanced technology and information that Loki doesn’t. And anyway, the guy’s like a living book, he knows things that Thor had no interest in.”

“So let’s just leave things as they are then,” Tony said. “We’re getting something out of it, there haven’t been any problems, meeting adjourned.” He waved his arms open and made to get up.

“I don’t want to be sitting in a meeting with SHIELD months from now explaining why we were concealing a war criminal after he blows something up,” Clint said. “And anyway, what do you care, Tony? You want him out of here.”

Steve spoke before Tony could get a word in. “Don’t act like you don’t enjoy messing with Loki,” Steve said.

“Messing with him?” Clint said indignantly. “He messes with me!”

Steve scoffed back at him. “You and Natasha both.”

“I don’t think we should be having this meeting,” Tony said. “What’s the point?” He hoped that it didn’t come off too aggressively, but he could feel his patience slipping. Natasha’s head turned towards him.

“Because it’s been long enough,” Natasha said. “We should be talking about it.”

“There’s nothing to talk about,” Tony said. “And anyway, I’m missing a TV show for this so if we could move along---“

“So what, is Loki just going to live in this tower forever?” Clint asked. No one spoke. “You know he’s not staying without a reason, and Thor’s not it. So let’s figure out what it is. Thor being gone is the perfect opportunity.”

Tony tried to stay very, very still. He could feel his heart racing, his breath frantic as he tried to contain it. He couldn’t freak out. They could figure it out then. Maybe he could just talk them out of it. “So if we figure it out and Thor’s gone, how do you think that’s gonna go over? Loki’s just

gonna say ‘you got me’, throw his hands up, and leave? No.” Tony’s hands had clenched together. “Let’s not antagonize him while Thor is out.”

“I agree,” Bruce said. “We should try not to jump the gun on this.”

“No,” Clint said. “We should have our guard up. We don’t know what Loki will do without Thor keeping him in line.”

“Do you really think that Thor is keeping him in line?” Tony said with annoyance. “Uh, maybe you haven’t noticed, but he doesn’t exactly check in with Thor and get his permission to do things.”

“What do you think it is that he wants, Tony?” Natasha asked, her sharp eyes piercing into him. She only meant to derail Tony’s defenses. Tony had to break eye contact. He gulped, involuntarily.

“Free room and board? A vacation?” Tony stood up. “How would I know?”

“Let’s look at the live video feed,” Clint said, ignoring him. Jarvis obliged. Tony didn’t have to look over to know that it would just be a loop pieced together from bits of mundane footage. From the corner of his eye he could see that it was Loki reading.

“I didn’t come to this meeting to play Big Brother,” Tony said. “Spying and meeting behind Thor’s back? Not okay,” he said, opening the door to leave the room. “This is still my tower, and if I say that I don’t care if Loki is here, then he stays.” Tony shut the door behind him. He tried to walk down the hall to elevator, but it was more of a run. He wanted out.

“Whatever,” Clint said as the door closed after Tony. “What’s his deal?”

“I think he feels indebted to Loki,” Steve said. “Which is another point. Loki has done some good things for us. Saving Tony, for one. So stand down on the suspicion.”

“Steve, it’s been months since this started,” Clint said.

“Exactly. And we’re fine. There hasn’t been a single incident. Stand down,” Steve repeated. “I make the calls on what’s best for this team, and right now what’s best is keeping Loki here. Thor needs him, he is helping Bruce, and you know that he saved Tony. He’s useful for our side.”

“He’s just using it to get closer to all of us before his next big plot,” Clint said dismissively.

“You don’t know that,” Steve said. “I wouldn’t let him be here if I thought that the team was in danger.”

“You’re too soft,” Clint said.

“I’m making the call,” Steve said. At a deadlock, the meeting fizzed out. Clint followed Tony’s exit not shortly after, slamming the door behind him.

Tony found himself in the garage, desperate for fresh air. Clicking his remote, the engine of his sport car revved before he popped open the door and slid in against the leather seats. His car peeled out of the garage and towards the interstate.

Tony needed to talk aloud. He turned to Jarvis, as he always did, even though he knew that there was nothing the AI could tell him that he hadn’t already programmed in.

“Jarvis, what am I doing?” Tony said.

“You’re driving a car down the highway,” Jarvis replied.

“It was rhetorical, Jarvis,” Tony said.

“Really?” Jarvis said.

“Yes,” Tony said dryly.

“That was rhetorical,” Jarvis said. Tony grinned.

“Just shut up for a minute, Jarv,” Tony said. His free hand brushed across his stubble as he thought aloud. “I need to defend Loki. I’m jeopardizing everything,” Tony said. “I’m jeopardizing my relationship with Pepper, I’m jeopardizing the team, my business.” Tony shook his head. “Pepper has kept me together through everything and I would not be the same person without her. I don’t deserve her, I don’t deserve her putting up with me and this,” he waved his hand around with frustration, “what is all of this?”

“Do you want me to inform you of your current surroundings or was it rhetorical?” Jarvis asked. Tony kept talking.

“Am I with Loki because I don’t think I’m good enough for Pepper and he’s damaged like me?”

“Perhaps these are questions better suited for a therapist,” Jarvis suggested.

“Like I would tell anyone,” Tony said. “If SHIELD got a whiff of there being a psychological file on me, especially one that involved Loki...” Tony’s voice trailed off. “After New York, it was Pepper that put me together again. Pepper keeps my whole life together, and Loki was kinda responsible for most, no, all of New York.”

“But now...” Tony recalled walking through the vineyards with Loki on their trip, how he’d smiled indulgently, pretending to be interested in the process of wine making. How he’d kept up the personal assistant disguise and carried their luggage. His fingers slipping down Tony’s suit, breathing warmth in against the cold night air. A hazy memory of the god laughing to himself as he carried Tony up the stairs. “Now I’m Loki’s Pepper.”

Tony wanted to slam on the brakes. Had he really just said that?

“That’s deep,” Jarvis said without any conviction.

“Remember how I told you to shut up?” Tony said.

“Certainly,” Jarvis said.

“You’re doing a great job,” Tony said. “Maybe I’m trying to control Loki so that I can stop New York from happening again. Or maybe I just really like feeling like I’m the stable force in someone’s life? Maybe I like the rush because he’s dangerous? But god, when I wake up in the morning and see him lying there it’s---you know?”

“Not particularly,” the AI answered.

“Maybe I’m trying too hard to figure it out,” Tony said. “I do want him, Jarvis. And I want Pepper. I just don’t know how much longer the two of them are going to put up with me. And this.”

His hands kneaded into the steering wheel.

“Am I ever not going to be a mess?” Tony asked. Jarvis understood that it was rhetorical this time.

When Tony did return back, it was late. He was carrying a heavy, grease-soaked paper bag of fast food with him. As he waited for the elevator to arrive at the lobby, he adjusted it in his arms. He nearly dropped it when he saw that Pepper and Loki were both standing in the elevator.

“Have fun on your joy ride?” Pepper asked, standing aside so that Tony could step in.

“What are you two doing?” Tony asked, not stepping in.

“I was about to go out to pick some things up from the store,” Pepper said.

“I was continuing my conversation with Ms. Potts,” Loki said. “I had only meant to go to the kitchen.”

“What were you talking about?” Tony asked suspiciously. Now it was occurring to him that they had both been standing side by side, leaning against the back wall.

“You,” Loki said, taking the fast food bag from him. The paper burned away in his hands, scorching everything inside. Then it vanished.

“Hey that was my dinner!”

“You’re stress eating,” Pepper said. “I thought you agreed that you’d take better care of yourself.”

“I’m sorry,” Tony said, putting a hand in front of his face and then looking out from behind it again. “Am I really seeing this right now?”

“Your brain is properly functioning, Stark,” Loki said. Tony’s eyes narrowed. He rubbed a hand down his mouth, curling it under his chin before letting go. He stepped into the elevator. “Jarvis, cut the security feed.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Was anyone watching the lobby feed just now?”

“No, sir.”

“Delete it,” Tony said with relief. “So other than conspiring to murder my dinner, what have you two been up to?”

“Tony,” Pepper said gently. “You’re tired. Go upstairs and go to bed.”

“No,” Tony said. He lifted his finger as if to point it and then curled it back in again, considering.

“Stark,” Loki said. “We are both residents of this building, are we not? I fail to see why it is so unusual for us to hold a conversation.”

“A civil conversation?” Tony said. “Is this...are you pranking me?”

“We’ve had several conversations,” Pepper said, smiling evasively. Her blue eyes wandered up towards the ceiling of the elevator as she briefly bit her red lips. She was anxious. “How could we

not?”

“By conversations,” Tony said, “Do you mean...” He moved his hands around in incoherent gestures. “As in,” he could feel his face beginning to redden.

“No,” Pepper and Loki both said together, both indignant.

“I would never,” Pepper said, puffing out a short, incredulous laugh.

“You can’t possibly imagine that I would, with this woman...” Loki said scornfully.

“Yeah, that’s never happening,” Pepper said, glancing over at Loki, riding out another incredulous laugh.

“It is a mutual feeling,” Loki said reassuringly, leaning back against the elevator wall again. Arms crossed, he glanced sideways at Tony. “Surely you don’t imagine that we would.”

Tony didn’t answer. He could feel his face burning. Embarrassment bloomed in his chest. It had been a reasonable conclusion to jump to, alright? “You both should know that we had a meeting this afternoon,” he said, swiftly changing subjects. “With Thor gone, Natasha and Clint are trying to take it as an opportunity to figure out what you’re really doing here,” he said to Loki.

“Let them try,” Loki said, unbothered. “Romanov has been trying the entire time I have been here, she will not find success.”

“You do know that eventually they will find out,” Pepper said. She looked at both of them. Tony was nervous, though he was struggling to conceal it. Loki could not have cared less.

“I’m not ready to die yet,” Tony said.

“Don’t be so dramatic,” Pepper said.

“Taking an arrow to the head is not how I want to go out,” Tony said.

“They’ll be more creative than that,” Loki said.

“Not helping,” Tony chided him. Loki rolled his eyes. “Your brother will kill me,” Tony said.

“How many times must I remind you that he is not my brother,” Loki said, temper flaring. It flickered back down. “I take no issue with anyone knowing, but I would prefer not to engage with Thor until you have completely come to your senses.”

“That is, when you end your affair with Loki,” Pepper said.

“Quite the opposite,” Loki said.

Tony felt like a mouse trapped in a cage. Loki and Pepper smiled at each other again, confidence reflected on both faces. Perhaps Tony had been drinking. Perhaps this was a hallucination. He wished he could believe that. No, he was perfectly, regretfully sober.

“Maybe you two could just share?” Tony suggested. He had his back to the closed elevator doors. His two lovers were a united force against him. Time sluggishly crawled forward, smothering him.

“My future will not lie on Midgard forever,” Loki said.

“I’ve invested my future with you,” Pepper said. “You need to start thinking about what is best for

you and for us.”

“We have elected to let you be firm in your own conclusion,” Loki said. “So that we know undoubtedly that you are moving forward in the life that you belong. This is the only time that Pepper’s life and my own will intersect. Our ambitions are different.”

“You have time but not forever, Tony,” Pepper said softly.

“This is indulgence,” Loki said.

Tony did not know how to respond. His lovers were tense but not aggressive. They seemed resigned. Pepper opened her bag, looking for her car keys. Beside her Loki quietly studied Tony, crossing one leg over the other while he leaned back against the wall.

Pepper pressed the button to open the doors. “Just make sure you make the right decision, Tony,” she said. Somberly, she gently brushed against him as she walked out of the opening doors into the lobby.

Tony’s heavy brown eyes glanced up at Loki. He felt the shudder of the doors close behind him. Loki gestured for him to step closer. “I will see you choose me,” he said, his voice a dark whisper.

“So how long have you and Pepper been talking?” Tony said light heartedly. Loki did not waver from his intention.

“I will,” he said, leaning down and pulling a slow kiss from Tony. His tongue slipped leisurely into the man’s mouth, meandering. When he pulled away his black pupils were wide and lustful. “I will,” he said, vanishing.

Tony reached out, grasping for a button to press. He was shaking, dazed. Now that he was alone everything was hitting him at once. They wouldn’t always have patience with him. A choice would have to be made. He had time, but not forever.

A Chance That I'll Take

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Tony crashed and slept for hours. When he finally did roll out of bed, it was well past noon. Before long he was down back in his lab, a mission at hand.

He would make a decision. He would choose for them because he loved them, and he owed that to them. They were right. They would eventually need to move forward with their lives. They needed to know whether or not that life included Tony. They deserved to know that.

So Tony proposed it as a question. He would list the qualities and faults of both. Make a pro and con list. Test variables. Hypothesize. Experiment. Analyze the results and try again. He would retest his hypothesis until the right answer came. Science would lead him through to the light as it always had.

First, though, he needed to consider Pepper's question. What was best for him? What was best for Pepper? For Loki?

Sitting down in a rolling computer chair, Tony pulled up a chart hologram into the air and began writing in floating luminescent blue with an electronically equipped pen. He wrote "Best for" in front of each of their names.

What was best for Pepper? She was brilliant at running their company. His hand hovered over the glowing ink. Was he best for Pepper? He paused, considering. He never made things easy for her. He had made a lot of mistakes, and made a lot of promises to make up for those mistakes. Not all of them he had kept. Slowly, the pen formed the letters of his name in the air. He wrote a question mark behind it.

What was best for Loki? A new path, Tony wrote quickly. He had never told Loki that he'd thought leaving Asgard was a good idea, though he agreed. Loki had given up his quest for their approval, and freed himself.

Tony looked at the space he'd given to his name. What was best for him? He wrote down Iron Man? Avengers? The pen looped into an empty arc. What Tony needed was breathing room.

He lost track of time as he tinkered with the lists, adding things and scratching them out. In his mind he heard an eloquent voice declare, "My future will not lie on Midgard forever." Tony turned the pen over in his hands. What had Loki meant by that? Did it entail going to other worlds? Because that... Tony wasn't sure that he could handle that. Feeling claustrophobic, he began counting his breaths, struggling to slow down. He rolled over to the computer desk, propping up his arm and resting his forehead in his open palm.

A while later he clicked off the hologram, setting down the pen on the desk. "Loki," he said, his voice tense. He knew that god would hear him. He knew that it made no sense for Loki to hear him from floors above, and yet, Tony knew without doubt that it was true. He expected it. Tony's eyes had pinched closed. Arm still propped against the computer desk, holding his head, he waited.

Loki's voice drifted over him, answering. Tony did not stir. He felt Loki's hand on his shoulder. When Tony didn't immediately speak, the slender fingers kneaded in, waiting.

"I need to know," Tony said. "What you meant."

Loki's eyes narrowed, for just a heart beat, before he licked his lips and politely asked, "By what?"

"When you said your future won't be on Midgard forever," Tony said, opening his eyes, staring at the cluttered desk.

Loki moved the papers aside, clearing a spot for himself to sit on Tony's desk. The man leaned back into his chair, not making eye contact. Bracing his hands on either side of the table's edge, Loki slouched forward, speaking gently. "Not all realms are the same as the one you glimpsed," he said, his voice hovering just above a whisper.

"I get this," Tony said. "I'm good at this. If you take me out of this place, no one's going to know that I'm Tony Stark," he said.

A pensive half smile tugged heavily at the corner of Loki's mouth. "It's not nearly so bad as you think," he said, glancing thoughtfully upwards. His dark hair caught the light as he gracefully turned his face back towards Tony. "No one here would ever address me as a king, and yet, I was royalty." His eyes seared with intensity, but he made no movements to otherwise betray his contempt for Asgard. He only waited patiently for Tony to return his thoughts.

"Why can't you just stay here? What's there to do?"

"Your view is limited," Loki said. He was attempting to be easy on Tony. It was impossible not to notice the man's exhaustion. Still, he could not manage not to sound just a tiny bit condescending when he said it.

"I'm the only person on Earth that's seen, been in another dimension," Tony said defiantly, finally meeting Loki's eyes. The god reached out and rested his hand on Tony's head, brushing a lock of hair with his thumb.

"You are," he said.

"It wasn't that great," Tony said, tensing. Loki drew his hand back, bracing his hands against the desk again and leaning back from the man.

"My library was not on Midgard," he said. Tony looked away, slouching in the chair.

"Not gonna remind you that you trapped me in there once."

"Among other things," Loki said, grinning deviously.

"Loki," Tony said. "I---"

"What?" Loki asked serenely.

A squeal squeaked from the computer chair as Tony rolled it back a few inches, pushing with his feet. "What is it, mortal?" Loki asked again, letting the words softly slip from his mouth.

"I'm not supposed to hang out in the Twilight Zone, jumping through space."

Loki tilted his head in profile from Tony, his shoulders pronounced by his seated position on the desk. "Innovators journey into the unknown, Tony. Do you not want to be like the scientists you have studied? I doubt another of your kind will be given the opportunity."

Tony thought to point out that Jane would be more than content to explore other realms in the name of science. But he knew better than to bring that up.

“What about Stark Industries? What about the Avengers?”

“You’re only looking at your loses, not what you could gain,” Loki said. “That is unlike you, Tony.” He sat up, bringing his hands together and slipping his fingers in between each other. “Though you may come to wish to leave those things behind.”

“Let me show you,” Loki said.

Tony scooted a little further back in the chair, watching Loki. “Just a brief trip. We’ll only be gone a few hours,” Loki said.

He stood from the desk, a beguiling smile perched on his lips. “Come along, Stark,” he said. Leaning down, he took one of Tony’s warm, anxious hands in his cold fingers. “Let me show you,” he whispered.

He rubbed his fingers against Tony’s hand, patiently waiting. The man’s body was tense, stiff. He lifted his head, looking at Loki. Parting his lips, he could only draw in a slow, cold breath. Slowly, Tony nodded.

Loki’s free arm slipped down around his shoulders, pulling Tony in. The world around Tony went blank, tumbling into crisp white, clear like a winter’s day over fresh snow.

Chapter End Notes

Tony's going to get to have some fun with his experiments to figure it out...

A Trip That I'll Take for You

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Tony was shaking. Involuntarily, helplessly, shuddering. As though he had come in from the throes of an avalanche, abandoned in the heart of winter. His teeth rattled in his mouth as he shook. It was only his nerves. Loki pulled him in close, whispering something in his ear that drifted down into him, soothing each nerve. Tony took a deep breath, relieved.

He blinked, able to see what was around him for the first time. Leaning back in Loki's arms, he looked around himself, dazed. Something held him suspended to the god, but the thought of this had been knocked completely from his mind.

The prideful grin on Loki's face was absolutely wicked. He was utterly pleased with himself, and completely incapable of disguising it. "Do you like it?"

Tony continued to look around him. His soft eyes blinked slowly as he stared, awe-struck. A low rumble of a charmed laugh sounded deep in Loki's throat as he watched his mortal's eyes wander.

The enormity of what he could see was unfathomable. The cosmos stretched on and on for, what, Tony realized, truly was forever. As far as he'd ever be able to conceive. Just before him was a behemoth cloud of gas and dust, pirouetting across the star flecked back drop in dazzling reds, pinks, blues, and purples. "That's the Orion Nebula," Loki said.

Loki's words were like a distant song. It was impossible to think, to speak, when the beautiful vastness of the universe was swallowing him whole. Light radiated from the distant formation, brilliant.

Tony blinked again, gasping in for a deep breath. It did not occur to him that the action should've been impossible. Instead what struck him was the salty tang of a tear. Loki said nothing of it, but a knowing smile gave him away as he pretended that he was seeing a distant cluster of stars for the first time.

He held Tony, suspended in the universe, for a long while before saying, "This is only our first stop." The man tensed again, but Loki was vanishing them away before Tony could react any further.

His feet met solid ground. Relief flooded Tony. He could stand on his own. Loki's arms were still around his back, but there was something strong and solid beneath him and a horizon line. He peered past Loki's shoulders, curious about what was beyond.

Loki released him, though he slipped a hand around Tony's own, more to keep him contained than anything. "Wait," Tony said.

The god had not taken a step forward. "What?"

"How was that possible? I need a moment. I need a moment." Tony took in a deep breath again. "That was incredible."

"Tony, there is much ground to be covered---"

"The stars. Those were the freaking stars. The stars!" Tony could hear himself word vomiting but

he couldn't stop.

“Yes,” Loki said tolerantly, pretending to be annoyed though he was deeply pleased with the man’s astonishment. Tony was dazed and wonder struck and there were still places to go.

“I’ve never gotten to look at them like that,” Tony said, taking in his new surroundings then. They were standing in a lush green forest, with a stony gray building just feet away from them. An ornately carved wooden door with a heavy brass knocker kept it shut off from the world. Though it looked ordinary, there was something sacred and respectable about the structure. Tony began to move forward, but Loki tugged him back.

“You must be quiet here,” Loki said.

“Got it,” Tony said.

“I mean it,” Loki said.

Tony grinned recklessly. Loki rolled his eyes, tugging at the man’s arm as he took the lead, walking up to the door. When his hand made contact with the metal the brass glowed green before the door groaned as it creaked open. Loki held tightly to Tony’s hand but made him walk in first, shutting the door behind them.

Tony could see nothing but blackness until he heard the door click shut. The moment it made contact with the doorframe natural light flooded in from a skylight above. Before them was a generously sized room with a very tall, lofted ceiling. Immediately in front of them was a long tiled pool. Its blue and tan mosaic tiles were obscured by clear, shallow water that winded into the basin from narrow streams that crossed the room. Beyond the long pool there were glossy, wooden floors with various large, brassy instruments. Bookshelves lined the sweeping walls to the skylight above.

“Take off your shoes,” Loki said, having already done so with his own as Tony had been gaping at the room. Tony raised an eyebrow suggestively, but Loki’s face remained flat, not amused. Sighing, Tony obliged, tossing his shoes off haphazardly by Loki’s neatly lined ones. “Step in slowly,” Loki said, demonstrating, “and clear your mind.” Ripples cast out from his legs into the cool pond. Tony glanced at his feet and then rolled his jean legs up to his knees.

The first foot that went in was fine. It was the second foot that made Tony’s head spin. “Clear your mind,” Loki said beside him. Tony put his hands out, steadying himself. The water was singing, sonorous, a million melodies at once, but not at all at discord. It was almost as if the water were alive.

“Walk forward,” Loki said.

Tony pushed one foot in front, wading forward. The sound decreased. He pushed the other foot forward. Again the songs became softer.

“Keep going,” Loki said, ahead of him.

As he pushed each foot forward, the songs got less and less, until at last he could hear only one. Tony knew the song instantly. It was one he knew intimately, although as it played, he realized that he had not known that he remembered it. The song was in his mother’s voice, singing a lullaby to an infant version of himself.

The song ended sooner than he would have liked, and he turned his head away from Loki, who was already out of the water, waiting several feet away. “I’d love to know what you hear,” Tony said as he stepped out.

Loki smiled in a way that said over his dead body and gestured Tony towards the device he was standing over. "What is this?" Tony asked, walking up beside him.

"This is the hall of records of a people that vanished millenniums ago," Loki said, turning a dial on the device. Tony likened it to a globe, with several large brass rings with measuring lines around it. "This," Loki said, tinkering with the dials and brass rings, "is a projector."

As the words left his mouth the device shot up a ray of golden light that expanded outwards, morphing into a complex rendition of a circuit board. Continually the design rearranged itself, displaying new configurations. "This is a history of---"

"Circuit boarding," Tony said, intrigued. The display was morphing beyond any design that Tony had ever seen, then into something that Tony had absolutely no understanding of. "I'd love to study this," he said. The golden light flickered off.

"Another time," Loki said. He walked over to the shelves and began looking for something. As he did Tony turned the dials, but he could not get it to project again as Loki had. The god returned, a large book in his hands. "This is a record of the evolution of their mechanics," he said.

Tony took the book from him, flipping it open. He was disappointed that he could not read the script, but the charts and diagrams jogged his mind anyway, rife with possibility. He sat down on the ground, flipping through the pages. Loki drifted away from him, looking across the shelves for something he had not already read.

It was a while longer before Tony looked up from the book. "You said these people vanished? What happened to them?"

"A massacre," Loki said simply, from over a book. "Well, several."

Tony took that in somberly. "And this place?"

"It cannot be accessed without the right magical code."

"And how'd you know?"

"I didn't," Loki said, turning a page over. "I had free time." Sensing that Tony wanted something more he looked up from what he was reading. "Often I would sneak out from the realm of Asgard in my youth, and this is one of the places that I found."

Tony closed the book in his hands. "This'll be some light reading for the trip back."

"Items cannot be taken from this place," Loki said, gesturing towards the water. "You do not wish to hear what it can do if you steal." He rose, stretching. "We should be moving on. Time is short if we wish to return to Midgard on the same day that we left." He took the book from Tony and returned it to the shelves, along with his own.

This time the water was quiet as they left. Tony slipped his wet feet back into his dry shoes uncomfortably, and Loki made him walk out in front again. The door clicked behind them as Loki stepped out, taking Tony's hand. He lead the man over to the clearing and said, "Now just one more stop."

Warmth hit Tony's skin as a sun shone down upon them. The two were standing in a garden that glowed in the hazy slumber of a slow afternoon. Tony could sparsely recognize any of the plants or fruits, except to note that they were well kept and manicured to be beautiful. He thought he might see apple trees in the distance, or perhaps gold pears. Loki walked out in front of him, expecting the

man to follow.

“This is so---“ Tony flipped the thought over in his mind. “Different. Than where I thought you’d go. I mean the library is not a stretch but, this is---”

Now Tony realized that he had been expecting Loki to take him to places far darker and ominous than these. Here felt safe. Here felt like a utopia. Loki was sitting down on the grass a few paces ahead of Tony, on a slope that overlooked a valley below, waiting for the man to catch up.

“Different,” Tony said, kneeling down next to him.

“If you wish to see the despair of the universe, that can be arranged,” Loki said.

“No,” Tony said. “I’m good.”

He settled down, looking out over the orchards and gardens beyond. That was when he realized that there were two suns in the sky, one of which was closer to setting than the other. Slowly it arced towards the horizon, casting soft shadows across the field.

They kept quiet company until after the first sun drifted down and disappeared beyond the horizon. As the second sun continued its descent downwards, Loki said, “I have found many an ugly thing in the nine realms. You have only known a few of them.” His shoulders rose up as he drew in a breath. “But I have too discovered the extraordinary in my wanderings.” He watched the second sun turn the sky into a blaze of color as night crept closer. “I wish for you to make those discoveries as well.”

“Loki,” Tony said. “I had no idea that you had seen all of this.”

“I said your world view is narrow,” Loki said, facing him.

Tony smiled nervously, looking down at the grass. Or what he could only liken to grass. He plucked a blade and ran it through his fingers. “This is a lot to take in,” he said. “Everywhere we’ve been has defied what I’ve known,” he said, watching as the second sun vanished. Night had crept in, and unfamiliar stars were awakening in the new sky. Tony dropped the blade of grass. The last time Tony had left Earth, it had been terrifying. This time had been slow, gentle. He’d been given time to appreciate things. To be met with wonder. Even in the narrow time frame of the day and Loki’s trying to fit everything in.

Loki tilted his head, bringing his face in closer to Tony. “I want you to know,” he said quietly, “what it is that you are being offered.” His warm breath met Tony’s face as he spoke. Tony’s eyes drew closed on instinct but Loki did not touch him.

“Come along,” he said, “before I lose the energy to take us both home.”

Chapter End Notes

I hope this was satisfactory after that cliffhanger. • _ •);
Shenanigans are in order.

Something That I Found

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Tony found himself alone in the tower lobby, his head still spinning, grappling to take in the newness of his travels. Suddenly everything around him was peculiar and strange in its mundaneness. He felt like a ghost, peering in on a world that did not belong to him.

Rather than confront the feeling, Tony headed up to the common room, where he passed out on the couch watching reruns.

Too prideful to let Tony see him, Loki passed out in his own bedroom, almost in the same instance as when he appeared there. Not that he would ever let on, but traveling like that was excruciating. Exhaustion claimed him, taking him in the arms of deep sleep for hours. He did not stir once until well into the next day.

Tony began tinkering with his lists again. He had moved on to pros and cons. With a conciliatory grin he wrote down “THAT” under Loki’s name and the pro list to refer to their recent world hopping. The bastard knew he was good, and Tony could only imagine Loki’s satisfaction at that.

He checked in on Loki once, to find that the god was sleeping. Knowing far better than to wake him, Tony decided to take the opportunity to focus on the other half of the puzzle. He put a call through to Pepper to join him for lunch, to which she politely reminded him that it was three on a Tuesday, a time that she was always in meetings. She would meet him at five when it let out.

“You have something to tell me,” she said with a tiny smile as he pulled out a chair for her. Tony was trying his best. He had reserved a table at a restaurant with a rooftop garden overlooking the city. There was a soft breeze blowing, catching the tablecloth occasionally, gently teasing up the corners before dropping the white cloth back down. Tony sat down across from her and declined taking the menu from the waiter. Pepper grabbed it for him and flipped it open, setting it in front of him.

“Can’t I just take you out for a casual dinner?” He asked, grinning as he glanced down at the menu.

“No,” she said crisply, folding her menu closed with a knowing smile. “So what is it?”

Tony shut his menu. “I’m not ready to give an answer yet,” he said to soften the disappointment.

“I wasn’t expecting you to,” she said.

The waiter returned, and Pepper grabbed Tony’s menu to hand to the waiter. He watched silently as she gave the waiter their orders. Did Loki know about his issue with being handed things? Would he accommodate it wordlessly, as Pepper did? Tony could not recall the issue coming up between them.

“Pepper,” he said, once the waiter had left. “I’ve been thinking a lot about what you said. And making lists. And running scenarios in my head. And I keep coming back to this question.”

He paused. She was waiting on him, patiently. The wind was picking up the loose strands of hair from her neatly arranged ponytail, playfully casting them back and forth in the setting light. He felt as though the air was being sucked from his lungs, but he had to ask. He had to figure it out for

them so he had to know. “You asked me to think about what’s best for me. I wanted to ask why you think...why I’m best for you.”

She met his edgy, apprehensive eyes slowly. “Tony,” she said, her voice wavering. “I love you. It’s really that simple.” Tony moved to speak but she cut him off. “We’ve been through this,” she said. “I want to be with you. And I---“ she looked away, her eyebrows furrowing as she thought of something. “I don’t think Loki is right for you,” she said in a whisper, glancing at the other tables. “It’s not my decision to make,” she said, her voice returning to normal. “But as someone that loves you Tony, let me say that he is never going to be stable for you.”

“You put up with too much,” Tony said.

“I do,” she said matter of factly. Hearing her say it hit him bluntly. It wasn’t that he’d been fishing for her to refute his statement. He knew it was true. But hearing her agree with it out loud was different.

Pepper adjusted the napkin in her lap. Of course she was better for him than Loki, and she was certain that he would see that. She couldn’t imagine that Loki was doing anything other than toying with Tony and using him for his own selfish amusement, and as soon as Tony came to his senses and realized that, this would all be over.

He was wavering on an apology when the waiter returned with their food. The conversation veered elsewhere as they began to eat, and Pepper lit up talking about an engineering deal that they were in the process of making. That was one thing he adored about her, he thought. Listening to her speak passionately.

When the bill came Pepper pulled out her card in one swift movement, before Tony could fumble his wallet out of his back pocket. She had it in the waiter’s hands before he could say anything and gave him a look that said not to bother arguing.

When they returned to the tower, Tony hesitated in the lobby. He grabbed Pepper’s hand. “Wait,” he said. “Just---“ He leaned in to kiss her. She tasted like warm vanilla. Her lips parted softly, confidently. When she pulled away from him he was reminded of warm gingerbread and lemon frosting.

“I’m going to go upstairs,” she said quietly. Her clever, icy eyes held something back from him. “Good night, Tony.”

Tony returned the phrase, wanting to say more, but he found himself distracted by the memory of his scrapped Iron Man suit lying discarded on the lobby floor. His eyes lingered on the spot where it had been. “Pepper,” he said, when he broke free of the thought. She was gone.

He ran his tongue across his teeth, thinking.

Loki woke up when he heard someone walking across the room outside of his bedroom. Glancing up from his pillow, he saw Tony’s silhouette in the doorframe. “You don’t have to get up,” Tony said, walking in. He sat down on the side of the bed, sinking softly into the mattress. Loki laid there, looking up at him with sleepy eyes that were growing sharper and sharper as he woke up. “Just,” Tony leaned down and kissed him. Loki’s tongue parted Tony’s lips, ravenous and luxuriating at once, claiming the pace. He tasted of spice and wintry air, the risk and the promise of the unknown beyond a snowy skyline. Tony pulled back when he felt Loki’s hand wander into his hair. Loki groaned with displeasure as their lips parted. Tony stood up.

“ ‘Night,” Tony said, leaving the room with the distraction of his thoughts. Loki’s dark eyes gave

away nothing of his own thoughts as he rolled over and returned to sleep.

Tony returned to his lab, urging his mind to make to make sense of things. He sat down in his chair, pulling up the lists again, adding the new data. Blue reflected across everything in the metallic room, glinting across any surface that could cast back some of the light from Tony's projections. The lists had multiplied and morphed greatly since he had begun working on them, but the more that he elaborated on them, the less certain he felt. Maybe it was simple. Tony ran his tongue across his teeth again, sliding slowly along the grooves.

His eyes fell on one of the items he'd circled repeatedly. How would the team handle finding out about him and Loki?

He closed his eyes. If they found out after the fact, he could easily spin Loki into the villain, couldn't he? Loki would undoubtedly lash out at him anyway. But if he told them he was with Loki indefinitely...

Tony stared at the lists absentmindedly. Slowly the image of Pepper talking animatedly at dinner bled into his thoughts like water into paper. He was going to miss that.

No, he had to be certain, he thought. It was too soon to be missing anything. There was too much riding on this. How could he know for certain?

He put a fifth question mark after "Team's Reaction?????" He hadn't been sleeping right. Tony put his head down on the computer table and heard his mother's lullaby. Stars and nebulae drifted into his dreams as he succumbed to sleep.

Loki slipped from a shadow and sat down on the desk beside him, folding his arms across his chest. He glanced at Tony's sleeping body and then the illuminated charts. It did not occur to the god that perhaps the projections were private. He skimmed through the lists, his stomach churning as he read the praises under Pepper's name. Heat met his cheeks as he read the ones beneath his own. Tony gasped for a breath, but Loki did not startle. He knew the sound well. Tony would continue to sleep, he was just dreaming. Loki saw the circled illumination about the team's reaction, and the question marks behind it.

His head tilted to the side. Loki's eyes narrowed, thin and fox like, considering. Then a puckish grin slit across his face. If that was holding Tony back, well, he had a solution.

Tony's breath rattled through him again, and he shifted his head. Loki gazed down at Tony. His limber frame was ill suited to the desk, and his long limbs did not fit comfortably. The man continued to sleep. Loki inclined his head towards the projections again, to read them more closely. Tony's breathing changed. Loki recognized it as Tony waking up. That was when it occurred to him that Tony would not be overly fond of finding him there with the lists exposed. He vanished as quickly as he had come, leaving Tony to awake none the wiser.

Chapter End Notes

...so close!

A Secret That We'd Kept

“Tony,” Steve’s voice said through Jarvis. “Get up here.” The captain’s voice was tired and impatient, like if he had to repeat himself one more time, just one more time, he would have Tony fearing for his life.

Tony set down the wrench in his hands. He was barely dressed, and had not bothered to address the bed head that was running wild above his tired face. “Ask him where the fire is,” Tony muttered to Jarvis, standing up.

“Well it’s definitely not under your ass,” Clint’s voice said through AI. Tony cracked a smile and headed for the elevator.

“I’m two minutes away,” Tony said. “You can choose team logos without me.” He pressed the button for the common room. “But if you insist, I say we use sharks. Maybe photoshop it up a bit.” The team sent no reply.

Clint, Natasha, Bruce, and Steve were seated on the sofa and armchairs, waiting for him. Tony took the seat closest to Bruce, grinning like a kid late to class. “Took you long enough,” Clint said.

“Nice outfit,” Steve said.

“It’s wear your pajamas to work day,” Tony said. “Frankly, I’m ashamed that you chose not to participate.”

Steve rolled his eyes and then plunged into his meeting notes as though nothing had occurred. “We have to consider a new proposal from SHIELD. They’ve been talking about sending half of the team over to the west coast.”

“For what?” Clint asked.

“Tony and I would be doing press for the Avengers and you three would stay and keep an eye on things here. When Thor returns he’d probably join us. It’d just be for a couple of weeks, to make a few appearances.”

“That’s a terrible idea,” Tony said. “My work is here. I’m not running up and down the west coast to get some media. And why do they want us to?”

“Fury thinks it would be good PR for our team,” Steve explained. “It’s something to consider, he’s giving us the option of discussing it.”

“Yeah, right.” Clint said. “What he means is 'here’s what you’ll be doing.’”

“Alright then. We’ve discussed it. It’s not an option,” Tony said. “Captain America can do the whole show and game, but I’m not.”

“I have to ask, what are they worried about on the west coast?” Bruce said. Steve sighed, sitting further back in his chair.

“Their sources say that there’s been reason to believe that a group similar to Hydra is active there. Fury thinks that if we make an appearance, it might deter them a bit.”

“That’s their job, let them clean it up,” Tony said.

“Yeah,” Clint chimed in. “Besides, we definitely shouldn’t consider anything like that until Thor is back. Do you really want to take out half of the team while you-know-who is here?”

“That’s the only thing that held me back from immediately saying yes,” Steve said. The captain was tense and tired. “Personally, I don’t have a problem with doing the west coast tour, but I also don’t want to leave Loki alone.”

“He’ll be fine,” Tony said. “I don’t want to do the tour, but you can go. The rest of us can handle him.” Tony made sure to lock eyes with Steve. “We’ve made it this far, if he was going to do something to us he would have by now. It’s fine.”

Steve shook his head. “It’s not that I’m just worried about what he’ll do to you, but what you will do to him. Everyone’s not on the best of terms.” Clint grinned, completely caught.

“We’re getting better at getting along,” Natasha cut in. “I think we can handle it,” she said, glancing at Clint. He ignored her look of reprimand. “Besides, Bruce would stay here, and he’s the only one that Loki talks to regularly.”

“How is that going, by the way?” Clint said, glancing over at Bruce. The doctor shrugged noncommittally. Annoyed, Clint turned his attention back on Steve. “What’s next on the agenda?”

“I’ll tell Fury we need more time to decide,” Steve said. “Maybe we can drag it out long enough for Thor to return.” He paused, considering that thought, before jumping into the next item on the agenda for Clint. “We need to schedule the next training for flight based combat.”

“Wait,” Tony said. “Tell Fury we’re not doing it. Or you’re doing it. Don’t drag it out. You know he won’t go for that.”

“Well I can’t exactly give him a good reason,” Steve said. “We’re not telling him what’s going on.”

“Blame it on me,” Tony said. “Tell him you need to keep an eye on me or something. He’d believe that.”

Natasha shifted in her seat, watching Tony carefully. Beside her, Clint had his trained eyes on Steve. They glanced at each other. Clint shook his head. “Fury can wait,” Natasha said. “Let’s not give him a reason to come looking around.”

“Alright,” Steve said. “Let’s just delay answering him.”

“No, let’s give him an answer---“ Tony was so intent on arguing with Steve that he did not notice until the rest of the team had turned their attention away from him completely. Clint had coiled tight like a spring on the couch next to Natasha, who was taking it in stride. He heard Bruce shuffle in the seat uncomfortably beside him, but no one spoke. Tony looked away from the captain’s strained face to see what they were staring at.

Loki was striding towards them, taking swift, heavy steps as he approached the team. His traditional Asgardian garb furlled out dramatically from him, the emerald green lining flickering from beneath opaque flares of black. He came to a halt just before the team’s cluster of seating, standing only a couple of feet from Tony’s chair. “I heard my name,” he said, letting his words slip down over them like a lasso.

“If you are concerned about what will occur in the Captain’s absence,” he said, glancing imperiously down at Steve, “you need not.” Loki stepped in close to Tony, looming right over the man’s chair. Tony’s heart raced off, his ears pricked as though he could hear a pin drop. His vision

tunneled, his body devoting all of its sense to the being above him. “Tony on the other hand,” Loki said, running his pointer finger across the top of Tony’s shoulder, sending the tight nerves there screaming, “Is another matter entirely,” Loki finished, his tone devoid of subtlety.

No one moved. They looked over at Tony, who had gone rigid. They looked up at Loki, who was smiling beguilingly, his narrow eyes focused and anticipatory.

They were not getting it. Loki glanced at each of their faces, soaking in the last time that they would look at him with suspicion, confusion. Slowly Loki walked around Tony’s chair. Tony heard each footfall with acute immensity. “Tony,” Loki said, stooping over the man, lifting Tony’s chin up with one hand. His dark hair fell across his sharp cheekbones as he tilted his own head, his fervent green eyes whispering reassurance as they met Tony’s. “Tony Stark,” Loki said, a languid, wicked grin curling up his lips, “is not going anywhere,” he declared, his tone absolute.

The team could see his face in profile, and one eye side glancing back at them from above a smug grin. Then Loki’s attention broke away from them and consumed Tony, his body holding still for one fleeting moment before he swept forward, his lips meeting the man’s with raw vigor. The action crashed through Tony’s anxiety, rerouting all of his nerves to receive. He felt Loki’s need with such intensity. It was crushing. Then, before he could return any of it the god broke contact, completing his sentence. “Tony Stark is mine,” Loki said, grinning down at him.

Tony saw a softness peering out from that conceited grin that he wanted desperately to reach out to. It was there and gone like a shooting star, but in that instance it was burning and bright, a wish that Tony urgently had to grasp and hold on to.

In the next moment reality came tumbling back in.

The room was silent. Unbearably silent. Tony glanced over at them and back at Loki. If he denied it, he would jeopardize everything with the god. That wasn’t an option. “This wasn’t a part of the plan,” Tony choked out in a whisper.

“You did not make the plan,” Loki replied.

The team had gone into shock. All of them. Loki sat down on the arm of Tony’s chair, waiting. It was Bruce that recovered first.

He didn’t hulk out, like Tony had expected. Though he may have been on the verge. Instead, he just stood up and left without looking at Tony, and that was a thousand times worse than anything the other guy could do.

Steve broke next. “I...I don’t even,” Steve said. “Tony, are you...? Loki’s not controlling your mind, is he?”

“He’s not,” Clint snapped, rising up. “I know what that looks like. I know what that feels like,” he said, walking up to Tony. Loki leaned in towards Tony, ready to take Clint on. “I have been worried about you this whole fucking time!” Clint shouted. “And now I find out that you’ve been fuck buddies with the guy that crawled into my mind?!” Steve’s face turned red. “No,” Clint said. “No fucking way.” He turned his attention on Loki. “I hope you’re real fuckin’ happy,” he snarled, “because I am not watching this shit go down.”

Natasha had been watching him carefully from the couch. “Does Pepper know?” She asked gruffly.

“Yes. The whole time,” Tony said. “It’s complicated.”

Natasha shook her head, her jaw locked. She rose from the couch. “You are an idiot and an

asshole,” she said. Clint was still wild eyed in front of the couple, but hearing her speak grounded him. She was leaving, and he decided to follow.

Only Steve remained. Tony expected his anger to be the worst of all, but Steve didn’t look angry. He looked heartbroken. Sure, there was anger and embarrassment there, but it was the heartbreak that stood out. Steve took a long time to speak. “I really believed in Thor,” Steve said. “And you.” His honest eyes locked on Loki. “You’re tossing a good man away from you, and you don’t even see it.”

“Do not presume to understand me or my so called brother,” Loki said with vitriol.

“I’m not presuming anything,” Steve said. “I gave you a chance. I believed in you and I gave you the benefit of the doubt. I’ve stood up for you,” Steve said. “And you’ve just been playing us this whole time.” Steve was incredulous. “Did you ever care about anything that had to do with Thor?” He looked away, biting his bottom lip. “I expect stupid, impulsive things from Tony,” Steve said, glancing over at the man. “But now I just think you’re an idiot,” he told Loki.

Neither mortal saw the god’s reaction.

The Captain turned his attention on Tony. “Now your weird behavior makes sense,” he said, shaking his head. He was still loyal to Tony, even if he was seething about him right now. “Don’t bother showing up to team meetings until you get yourself together.”

Tony looked down at his hands. He heard Steve get up and leave, but he did not move until he heard the elevator doors close. His head was spinning.

“What...” Tony said, glancing up at the god sitting beside him, “What was that?”

“You had to know,” Loki said. “You wanted to know how they would react. It held you back.”

“But you couldn’t at least tell me?” Tony said, losing his patience. “Hey, I’m up for a surprise make out session in the middle of a team meeting, the safe word is ‘what the fuck?!’”

“That’s a phrase darling,” Loki said.

“Smartass,” Tony said. “That is not how I wanted to tell them.”

“You weren’t going to tell them,” Loki said.

“Sure I was. Just not yet.”

“Liar,” Loki said. Tony glared at him.

“I was gonna do it with a little less tongue,” Tony said. “I mean that was one way to do it but---“

Loki laughed. A true, genuinely pleased laugh.

“What’s so funny?” Tony snapped.

He glanced away, smirking. “That turned you on,” he said.

“Yeah right,” Tony said, feeling the burn in his cheeks. “You blind sided me.”

“Like I said,” Loki replied, rising up off the arm of the chair. “You needed to know their reaction, and you were not going to tell them yourself.”

"I was," Tony said. Loki was lowering down into his lap, reclining Tony back against the chair.

"I have a right to be known as well," Loki said. With him so close Tony was thinking of that burning star again. He wanted to be angry, but he was chasing after something else, and it was so very difficult to be angry with Loki when he was wrapped around Tony, radiant with enchantment.

"That was not what I expected from Steve," Tony said. "God," he said. Something illegible crossed Loki's face. "You're not an idiot," Tony said.

"Obviously," Loki said.

Tony rolled his eyes. "Why'd you choose today? Were you worried about the possibility of me leaving for the coast?"

"Today is simply the first Avengers meeting you've had this week," Loki said.

"Say it was because you didn't want me to leave," Tony said with reprimand.

"It was merely fortuitous that your discussion included that," Loki said coyly. Tony's face went deadpan. "Steve was wrong about something else too," Loki said, his voice dropping into a low whisper. "I know better than to throw a good man away."

He felt Tony's arms wrap around him in acknowledgement. His lips glided over Tony's cheek, his soft breath brushing against the skin. "I want," he said, exposing Tony's neck, "you to choose me soon."

He rested his cheek against Tony's and whispered into his ear, "I want the time that you have to be with me." He felt the man's lips meet his skin. "Hurry, Tony."

Tony closed his eyes and let his lips wander, drawing a soft sigh. Loki's garb was restrictive past the neck, but Tony didn't mind. He was content to go slowly. He wanted to find the eye of the storm in the chaos.

"Sir," Jarvis interrupted. "I am receiving a message from Mr. Barton that he would like to use the television in this room and he has no qualms with shooting an arrow into anyone present."

Tony sighed with annoyance, but Loki was already remedying the situation, the amber colored sheets of his bed unfolding around them before the electronic voice had faded away.

The Things That I Overheard

Loki's face was half obscured by the amber pillow, his lush green eyes staring at Tony's face just inches away, his satisfied smile slipping down into obscurity beyond the plush down.

"What," Tony said, rolling into his pillow and hiding his own face, "are you going on about," he said, muffled.

He waited, but he heard nothing from Loki. "Say something," he prompted. There was a half-hearted crack of a laugh beside him. Tony was torn between going back to sleep and kicking him. After hesitating, he decided to gently kick the god and roll completely over to his side, facing the door. Loki drew in closer, wrapping his arms around Tony, pushing him over as he took Tony's pillow for himself. "Bed hog," Tony muttered.

"This is my bed," Loki said, his voice right up against Tony's ear.

"And this is my building," Tony said.

Tony waited for a reply, but he heard nothing. Slowly, he drifted back off to sleep. When he awoke in the morning he heard Loki in the shower, and knowing that the god would be in there for a good hour, he showed himself out.

First, Tony would take his own shower. Then he would start damage control with the team. He knew that Pepper would know from Natasha, and that would bring a whole new element into things. As he showered and dressed he debated over which person he should talk to first. He felt most obligated to Bruce, but that seemed like a bad idea. There hadn't been enough time for him to come to terms with things. Tony wondered if Bruce would have anything to say to Loki.

It was with this that Tony concluded that talking to Steve would be the best place to start. Jarvis confirmed that the captain was on his own floor. As the doors slid open, Tony made out the captain's back from behind a stretched canvas. He knocked on the doorframe of the elevator. Of course Steve had heard him, but it was the point that mattered.

Tersely Steve peered out from behind the canvas. "Can I come in?" Tony asked. Steve nodded.

Tony found a place to sit beside one of the canvases. For a while Steve ignored him, choosing instead to add details to his rendering of a skyscraper. "That's really something," Tony tried.

Steve set down the brush in his hand. He wore loose cotton pants that were flecked with paint and a snug white t-shirt that strained as he sat up straight. "What do you want to say?" He asked.

Tony found it unnerving that Steve would not look at him. His eyes scanned the painting in front of him instead, as though the captain were lost in the city streets below the skyscraper he'd drawn. "I was going to tell everyone," Tony said after a while.

"Yeah?" Steve said. He picked up the brush again, adding a stroke of gray to the painting. "When?"

"Eventually," Tony said.

"Do you understand why we're upset?" Steve asked. He took a broad stroke with the brush. "We've been on edge for months now, because we've thought we were under threat. You could have told us."

"I couldn't," Tony said.

Steve flicked the paintbrush back and forth, irritated. "What was going through your mind as you watched Thor try to reconcile with his brother? What do you think he's going to do when he finds out? You are going to be the one to tell him," Steve asserted. "And he is going to be disappointed."

Tony wanted Steve to look at him, to acknowledge him, even as he was being lectured. The captain refused. "Was this just a game to the two of you?"

"No," Tony said earnestly. "It's not. It's complicated and messy, but that's kinda my M.O.," Tony said. "But it's not a game." If only Steve would look at him.

"Tony, what do you think is going to happen at the end of this?"

"That's what I'm trying to figure out," Tony said.

"I don't get you Tony," Steve said. "Why are you doing this?" He finally turned, his blue eyes flicked with exasperation as they stared at Tony.

Tony sighed. He found himself wishing that Steve could tell him the answer. "I--he needs me, Steve."

"He doesn't need anyone, he does what he wants," Steve said.

"No," Tony said, shaking his head, "he's not entirely the devil he makes himself out to be." Tony said it contemplatively, with concern. "He's not."

"Tony," Steve said. "You don't really believe that he's good for you?" Tony registered pity on the captain's face. "You have Pepper. Can't you be content? She needs you too."

Tony glanced down. "She doesn't need me," Tony said. "She can stand on her own without me. I'm the one that needs her."

Steve wiped his hands on his pants, missing the line of gray paint that had dried on his arm. He was not going to tell Tony what to do with his relationship any further. That was up to Tony to figure out. "Do you think that Loki meant anything he said here with us?"

"Yes," Tony said. "Steve, he has been trying. I've made sure of that."

"Right," Steve said insincerely.

"I didn't want this to happen," Tony insisted. "I never meant for things to get out of control."

Steve pushed out a laugh, shrugging. "You brought in the god of chaos and you didn't think things would get out of control."

"Steve," Tony said. "I'm just trying to keep it together."

"I know," Steve said.

Tony stopped. He thought he'd have to defend himself to Steve, he thought he'd have to argue harder with Steve than anyone else simply because he was always in charge. His friend half-smiled at him instead, hunched in the mid-day light with his canvases around him, hiding his own conflicting emotions to present compassion instead. For once, Tony actually saw a kid from Brooklyn in him, not a captain.

“Thanks,” Tony said.

For a while the two sat in silence. “So, is he going to be living here long term then?” Steve finally asked.

“I don’t know,” Tony answered.

“And Pepper---?”

“I don’t know.”

Steve looked at his canvas, considering. “Be careful Tony.”

“Me?” Tony said. “You know that’s not my thing.”

“I mean it,” Steve said, ignoring Tony’s light tone.

“Yeah,” Tony said, standing up and stretching. “I know.” He turned to leave.

“You’re still out of team meetings until you get yourself together,” Steve said.

Tony stopped, his back to Steve. He considered saying something but thought better of it. Somberly, he headed to the elevator.

Loki materialized beside him suddenly as he rode up the tower, scaring the life out of him. Tony leaned back against the wall, catching his breath. “What?” Tony gasped.

“Banner was most unreceptive,” Loki said. “He rather threatened me.”

“Yeah?” Tony asked. “Just now?”

“He called me down to meet,” Loki explained. “He made it particularly clear that he would enjoy a repeat of our original encounter.” Tony couldn’t stop a grin. Loki stepped in, leaning over him. “I assured him that was unnecessary,” Loki muttered.

“If you change your mind, a few of the floors need repaving anyway,” Tony said.

“Stark,” Loki said, slowly pinning his shoulder against the wall, running his thumb back and forth against Tony’s collarbone. “Your friends are obnoxiously protective of you.”

“Can you blame them?” Tony whispered with a smirk.

Natasha found them lip-locked and oblivious when the doors opened. “Is this going to be a daily thing?” She said dryly. Loki leaned back from Tony, revealing the breathy, flushed man. “Oh please, don’t mind me,” she said, rolling her eyes. “Make out wherever you want. Team meeting. Elevator. Whatever.”

“Just---” Tony said, smiling apologetically. Loki stepped back from him, glaring at Natasha.

“Shove it,” Natasha cut him off. “You,” she said, addressing Loki, “out.”

“Ms. Romanov I---”

“Agent,” Natasha corrected him. “And this is between Tony and I, so you can get. Out.”

Loki had zero intention of moving. He would not be commanded. Tony mildly nudged at him with

his foot. "We just have a little catching up to do," Tony said, gently urging him to go. Loki vanished with a showy firecracker of a bang. "He, uh, does that," Tony fumbled as the sound rang out of their ears.

Natasha gave him a look that said she could not care less. She crossed her arms, a tight frown pinched on her face. "I'm not sure if I'm more surprised with Pepper for putting up with this, or you for being dumb enough to do it."

"Well let me know your findings," Tony said playfully.

"What are you going to do?" Natasha asked.

"Think it over with a bottle of whiskey," Tony said.

Natasha glanced around the elevator, seemingly restraining herself from something. She snapped anyway, punching Tony in the stomach, "that's for Clint," she said. He felt a smack on the back of the head as he leaned forward, clutching at his gut. "And that's for Pepper." Tony struggled to right himself. She hadn't hit him in a way that would leave any damage, but damn did it hurt the way she wanted it to. "You're an idiot," she said pitifully. "I hope he's fucking great in bed because you have really messed up this time."

"Oh he is," Tony said, still recovering, "and if this mess is my biggest fuck up then I did okay."

Natasha looked away scornfully. "I don't need details," she said. "Is this funny to you?"

Tony stared at her, rigid against the wall. There was no mistaking his grimness. Her shoulders relaxed. "What is it then, Tony?"

"Yeah, it started out casual," Tony said. "But it's not like that anymore. He's complex and intoxicating and I---" Tony took in a tense breath, "I never know what's going to happen with him but I want to find out. Always."

"Tony," Natasha said. "I don't know what he's got on you but you've got to get over it---"

"Get over it?" Tony said, his voice climbing. "This isn't some one night stand, Natasha. I know those. I get lust. I can sleep with anyone I want. This is more than that. Don't act like it's cheap."

"We're worried about you, Tony."

"I didn't ask you to be," Tony said.

"Tony," Natasha said, eying him closely. Red curls obscured half of her face as she looked up from over crossed arms. "You know your relationship with Pepper is going to end," she said, not unkindly, the words coming gently from a lower octave.

"Oh? You get to decide that?" Tony said with anger.

"Tony," Natasha said. "You know." Her words fell before him and stayed there. The agony on his face was painful for her to see. "Don't you?" Tony did not meet her eyes. With a sober sigh she quieted. Tony reached out and pressed a button for the next floor, just to leave. "You don't have to choose him either, Tony. You could just be you," she said as the doors opened.

"No," he said, walking past her and stepping out. "I need someone...I need someone keeping me grounded," he said in a mumble.

As the doors shut behind him she found herself wondering how Loki fit that role. She had adjusted to the situation faster than the rest of the team, picking apart the pieces and plucking out the best solutions. Natasha was certain that Pepper would be better off not chasing Tony around. Pepper shouldn't have been in the situation they were in now. Though, Natasha was uncertain as to how Loki had come to captivate Tony so thoroughly.

She recalled then weeks ago, when sitting at the table she had asked Loki what he'd found that was worth holding onto. The memory hit like an ice bath. It had been Tony.

Natasha shifted back and forth on her feet. How much of it should she choose to believe? It was her duty to protect Clint, and Tony as well. How could she do that best?

Natasha went down into the gym to blow off some steam.

"Tony," Pepper was saying, already well into their argument, "I don't want to do this right now. I know you're getting it together, but could you give me some space?!"

"Pep, I didn't mean for it to happen like that---"

"Oh? You didn't mean to embarrass us? You couldn't have waited until you figured it out, you had to make me look like a---"

"He thought it would help me figure it out if the team knew---"

"Right, because he should be making all of the decisions. Great. Just great." She waved her hand back and forth, as though she could bat away the tears she was on the verge of. "When I say I don't want to do this right now, I mean it." Tony was just as volatile and vulnerable as she was. "Don't. Just stop."

"Pep---"

"Tony, get out. I need space. I don't want to argue with you right now."

Cabinet doors slammed open in the kitchen as fast as the elevator would carry him there. Tony pulled out any and all of the liquor in his cabinets, desperate to drown out the voices of his friends and lovers. He just needed it to stop. For a minute.

Tony had not felt the treacherous embrace of self-destruction like this in a long time. Its grip had softened recently. Now he welcomed it like an old friend, taking the bottles up into his room and curling into bed, knowing that was where he was going to end up anyway.

He felt the first drink go down, the burn in his throat. He stopped paying attention after that.

"Tony," Loki said, appearing animatedly in his room some time later. He was excited about something, and eager to pull Tony into it. His eyes raced across the room, seeking out Tony's form. He knew the man was there. Resigned frustration met him when he saw Tony. Walking up to the bedside, he knelt down, trying to assess just how drunk Tony was.

"Hey there," Tony said with a slapstick smile, pointing at Loki.

"There is a meeting about us going on right now, Stark. Would you care to see?"

"About how handsome we are?" Tony guessed.

“Us,” Loki said, putting his hand on Tony’s forehead. He debated leaving Tony there. How much of it would Tony remember? “I’ll tell you later,” he said.

“No,” Tony said. “I wanna see.” He reached out and grabbed Loki’s shoulder. “I can do it,” he said with a childish tone.

“Stark, this is an issue that will need to be addressed,” he said, smelling the alcohol on Tony’s breath. “My tolerance for it is thin,” he said with threat, “but this is not the time.” He pulled Tony’s arm up around his shoulder. Loki could work with this.

The two appeared in the upstairs bar, where they had first met in the tower. Loki hid them behind the counter, wrapping his arm around Tony’s back to steady him. “Be quiet,” he whispered. Tony leaned forward onto the countertop and held himself up there.

Clint, Natasha, Bruce, and Steve had brought the room’s chairs closer together. They spoke freely, but a cloud of secrecy loomed over them.

“I can’t hear,” Tony whined.

“Be quiet,” Loki whispered back. He knew he was cloaking their presence. He still wanted Tony to be quiet though, so he did not let on about their safety. Loki put his finger to his lips for Tony’s sake, hoping that it would sink in. The man did quiet, but only after mocking the action, putting his own finger to his lips and widening his eyes as though he had a great secret.

“You have to admit it makes sense now though,” Bruce said. “A lot of sense.”

“Are you going to keep meeting with Loki?” Clint asked.

“No,” Bruce said. “We had our last meeting today.” He primly adjusted his glasses. “I should’ve taken him down then, but I haven’t spoken to Tony.”

“I’m not sure that’s a good idea anyway,” Steve said. “Tony wouldn’t react well to anything happening to Loki.”

“I can’t believe I’m hearing those words,” Clint said. Various forms of agreement were uttered around him. After a while Clint said, “In the invasion, I saw that guy’s mind. I can’t imagine that Tony’s...in love with him.”

“Loki doesn’t exactly come off as the loving type,” Bruce agreed.

Loki’s fingers combed through Tony’s hair then, and came to rest on top of his head, absently fidgeting back and forth as his attention remained focused on the conversation. In a more sober frame of mind Tony might’ve wondered which of them it was that Loki wanted to reassure more.

“This is came-to-conquer-Earth Loki. We can’t let Tony be with him,” Clint said. “Tony’s gotten himself in over his head. There’s no fuckin’ way that Loki cares about him.”

Natasha tilted her head to the side, frowning. “A few weeks ago,” she said. “I tried getting Loki to tell me why he was putting up with this. We haven’t made it easy,” she said. Tony heard Loki grumble something in agreement beside him. “If he’s stayed for Tony,” she said sullenly, “then we might have to consider that there is something being reciprocated.”

“Guys,” Steve said. “Loki’s not incapable of feeling,” he said incredulously. “Sure, he might have the ego of a guy that tried to take over the planet, but Thor’s never talked about him being heartless.”

“Thor doesn’t exactly have a clear head on the matter,” Bruce said.

“No, but he’s not dumb,” Steve said. “And there’s a reason that he believes there’s a chance for Loki. The guy isn’t all bad. I wouldn’t have encouraged Thor if I thought it was hopeless.”

“Would you have encouraged Tony though?” Clint counter argued.

Steve shrugged with disbelief. “That’s completely different.”

“Awww,” Tony said suddenly, loudly. Loki tensed beside him.

“Shhh,” he hissed.

“You’re a babe,” Tony slurred, giggling to himself.

“Stark,” Loki snarled indignantly. Tony giggled again, blocking out a little of the team’s conversation.

Clint was laughing. “I would pay good money to see that guy carrying a bouquet of roses. Do you think it was the helmet that did Tony in? Is that his thing?”

Bruce bit back a laugh. “We don’t need the mental images,” he said.

“Maybe Tony’s had a subscription to Reindeer Games Magazine this whole time,” Clint said. “We’ll just crush the damn helmet and it’ll all be over.”

“No,” Tony gasped. He grabbed onto Loki’s arm. “Can’t let ‘em,” he whined. Loki redirected Tony’s arm away and dropped it back on the counter.

“I wish it were that easy,” Natasha said. “It really changes the way you look at the last few months, doesn’t it?”

“Yeah,” they all agreed.

“It’s Tony’s decision, not ours,” Bruce said, leaning forward and resting his head on a closed hand. “But,” he said. “Considering that it’s Loki, and the circumstances, I think we have some right to intervene. I’m worried about Tony.”

“Hell,” Clint said. “Loki could have some sort of hold on him that we don’t know about. This could just be a game for him.”

“It’s not for Tony,” Steve said. “He’s certainly sincere.” The captain closed his eyes in a frustrated sigh. “Maybe Tony needs some space to clear his head.”

“A Loki detox,” Clint said. “That’s genius.”

Tony heard Loki shift with agitation beside him, keying himself up.

“That’d be good for Pepper too,” Bruce said. “Maybe the three of them should spend some time apart. Then Tony can sort himself out and we can get a better grip on figuring out what’s going on.”

Steve nodded. “I think that would be best for Tony. The guy’s a wreck.”

“How do we know that Loki’s not going to break the rules?” Natasha said. “He doesn’t exactly have to follow them.”

“That’s a great test though, isn’t it?” Bruce said. “If he can prove that he’s willing to follow them and Tony comes out of it still needing him then we can take him more seriously.”

“How long?” Steve asked.

“How can you put a timeline on something like this?” Clint asked.

“It’s however long we can wait for,” Bruce said. “How about two weeks. That’s not that long, but it’s still considerable.”

“Alright,” Steve said. “What’re the rules gonna be?”

There was a clattering as one of the cabinet doors was pulled open, a loose can inside falling out. Loki spun around and grabbed Tony. “No!” Tony shouted.

“They will hear us,” Loki said in an urgent whisper.

“Nooo,” Tony complained, struggling to pull away. Loki ignored him. He pulled the man away from the cabinet, fighting to hear the conversation. In the commotion the team had moved past setting the ground rules. Bruce was saying something about Tony, and the team was nodding in agreement.

“Thanks,” Steve was saying. “He’ll listen to you.”

“He doesn’t have much choice,” Bruce said.

“Neither do we,” Clint said.

Tony kicked Loki in the shins and he dropped the man with an annoyed hiss. Once Tony was free though, all he wanted to do was babble. Loki finally summoned a second spell to quiet the man and listened in on the team instead. Their conversation had ended. Loki turned back to Tony, and in the next instant they were back in Tony’s bedroom.

Tony collapsed on the bed, but he would not stop talking. His mouth moved in excited, soundless jolts as the silencing spell did its job. Loki ignored him, and paced the room instead, picking up anything that might help Tony get hammered any further as he did. The bottles vanished back into the kitchen. Loki continued to pace the room, considering the team’s proposal. Two weeks. That was a small price for a bargaining chip of their trust.

Loki glanced over at Tony. He was lying on the bed now, smiling, still talking. Could he be left alone for two weeks?

Loki walked up beside the bed and sat down, lifting the silencing spell. “And that’s why a rotary engine is insane,” Tony said.

“Tony,” Loki said, his voice heavy but composed. “You must listen.”

“Uh-huh,” Tony smiled.

“In two weeks you will choose me,” Loki said.

“Uh-huh,” Tony said, gazing at the ceiling.

“You will take care of yourself in that time,” Loki said. Tony’s eyes were getting heavy. “Say you will.”

Tony smiled, but his eyes were closed. "Say it," Loki said.

"Okay," Tony said.

Loki saw the man drifting into sleep, exhaustion echoing through his features as the giddy consciousness left him. There were bags beneath his eyes and, Loki could swear, a new white hair on his head. He brushed the man's otherwise umber hair back, frowning in the dim light. "Stark," Loki said, leaning down and kissing his forehead. "What have you done."

Not shortly after Loki was back on his own floor, where Bruce came to inform him that he was not to encounter Tony for the next two weeks. The god was more cooperative than Bruce had suspected. The team would be monitoring closely.

The First Day That We Spent

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

They had told Loki that he couldn't visit Tony, but they didn't say anything about not visiting *them*. It was a factor that Loki planned on extorting mercilessly.

Tony had not taken the team's ultimatum well. Once he'd sobered up and Bruce had sat him down to talk, Tony threw a fit. He insisted that they were nosy and overprotective and out of line and unfair and he was handling it and he should just evict them all right on the spot. Steve threatened to put a call in to Fury to tell him who'd been living there. That put a stop to that.

He had planned on holing himself up in his lab right then, but Steve corralled him into going out to lunch. After that Bruce came and brought Tony with him on his volunteering at a local clinic. It wasn't until ten that night that Tony was alone again.

When he sat down on his bed he tried to remember the day before. He recalled seeing the team talking briefly, but mostly he remembered Loki putting his fingers to his lips with annoyance, and some time later laying in bed, staring over at him, sitting there. In Tony's patchy memory he saw Loki turned away from him, muttering something. He wasn't sure if he'd imagined Loki's hand on his forehead.

Jarvis wouldn't allow him to check in on Loki or Pepper's surveillance, or any of the surveillance feeds for that matter. Tony was annoyed that the team had figured out how to get Jarvis to do that for them. He did confirm however, that Loki was still residing in the building, and that eased some of Tony's anxiety.

Steve and Bruce had both avoided the topic of Loki that day, and Tony had not brought it up.

With the first day down, Tony fell asleep. Slowly, unhappily, after hours of staring around his empty room.

Natasha had set her sights on looking out for Pepper first. Not that she didn't want to help Tony, but he had enough people to look out for him and of the other residents, Natasha was closest to Pepper. They had become good friends post-New York, particularly over their mutual disdain for incompetent people.

Pepper was at her desk when Natasha came in. She sat down in one of the chairs across from Pepper and picked up a magazine. Flipping it open casually, she read an article while she waited for Pepper to finish whatever it was she was doing at the computer.

"Where'd you want to go to?" Pepper asked finally. Natasha set the magazine down.

"Actually, I thought we'd just stay here," Natasha said. "We can order in if you want, but I'm not really hungry."

Pepper bit her lip. She knew what Natasha wanted to talk about, and why she was there.

When Natasha had told her what happened, they had spoken a little about the topic, but not much. She wouldn't turn Natasha away, but she wasn't looking forward to the conversation they were about to have either. It would be worse to drag it out, Pepper decided. Natasha seemed to think so too. She was watching Pepper intensely.

"I'd rather be having this conversation when Tony's over Loki," Pepper admitted.

"Forget Tony right now," Natasha said. "What about you? What's going on with you?"

Pepper smiled and looked down at the desk. No one had asked her that yet. "I'm not great," she said. "Frankly, I'm angry."

"You should be," Natasha said.

Pepper pushed her hair back over her shoulder, irritably recalling something. "He's slept with a lot of bad choices in the past, but this is a new record," Pepper said. Now that she could really tell someone about the situation the words were coming quickly with vileness. "This isn't the first time he's screwed up, but god is it bad. And he's always going on about how I'm the only woman he's ever really loved and how he needs me and that it's always been me and all this---" She stopped with frustration. "How can he say that shit to me when Loki's living right downstairs?"

Natasha nodded her head. Pepper's voice picked up pitch, racing forward. "Do you know how many exes and one night stands we've run into over the years? But this is the first that's lived here. And it's not just anybody. It's Loki. How the hell?"

"I know Tony's had a hard time dealing with everything that happened, I thought this thing with Loki was just him trying to deal with it I---"

"And I keep---I believed him. Every time he apologized I believed him. And I thought Loki would be like the rest but this has gone on so long now that I---God, am I angry."

"He was an absolute mess after New York. It took me forever to get through to him. And then he'd be his charming self again, and he'd have that stupid smile of his and the way he'd look at me was just so damn loving and it'd all be alright again and I'd think about how much I missed that part of him and it was agonizing and the thought of losing him again was just," she rubbed her forehead. "Horrifying," she said.

Natasha waited a little while before speaking. "I mean this well," Natasha said gently. "Why do you want to stay with Tony?"

Pepper shook her head, frowning. "I've nearly lost him so many times, I---the thought of walking out on him myself after watching him come back from the brink of death all of those times, I just---" She folded her arms across her stomach. "I love Tony and I've built my life around him. I don't know what I'd do. Not after we've come this far."

"You'd make it," Natasha said. "You'd make a life of your own and you'd find someone new." Pepper's expression dimmed.

"It's the way he looks at me," Pepper said, "I know it sounds stupid but when he holds me it's like I'm the only person in the world. I've never felt threatened by anyone he's met. I've never felt like I'd actually lose him."

"Is that really fair to you, though?" Natasha said. "You deserve someone that has themselves together, Pepper. You're better than a fall back. Listen, I like Tony. But he has been a

terrible partner to you. I think you deserve better.” The sincerity in her tone was disarming. “Of course you’ve never felt threatened. Tony would be an idiot to lose you. He knows it just as well as you. But that doesn’t mean that you should stay with him.”

“I know you love Tony,” Natasha continued. “And I would not intervene if I didn’t think I should. I’m telling you this because you deserve to have someone looking out for you. Whatever happens with Tony and Loki, you’re going to get hurt if you stay in that mess. Don’t do it.”

“What about when Loki leaves him?” Pepper said.

“If Loki leaves him,” Natasha said.

“Oh, he’ll leave him,” Pepper said. “You don’t really think he’s capable of being in an actual relationship with Tony, do you?” She said with disgust.

Natasha twisted her lips into the corner of her mouth. “I don’t know what’s going on there,” Natasha said softly. “But whatever it is, I don’t think that Loki would react well to Tony leaving him. And you’re in danger being in his line of fire.”

“I told you,” Pepper said. “We’ve struck an agreement. It’s nice to have someone else that’s struggling with Tony. Not that I like him. But.” Pepper tilted her head. “Loki’s not the one I’m angry at.”

“You should listen to that anger,” Natasha said.

“I don’t know,” Pepper said. “This is the way it’s always been with Tony. I keep coming back to him.”

“You need to think about what’s best for you,” Natasha said.

Pepper grinned sorrowfully with a short little sigh of a laugh. “What?” Natasha asked.

“I said the same thing to Tony,” Pepper said.

Natasha sat back in her chair, not answering. She hoped that this forced separation would shed some light on things for Pepper too. “I changed my mind,” Natasha said. “I do want to go out. How about that beer garden a few streets over?”

Pepper stood up from her desk. “That sounds like a great idea.”

Natasha drove, and when they got to the restaurant the conversation darted across any and everything but Tony. They returned to the tower later that night, and Pepper was reasonably happier. When Natasha went to her own floor she found that Clint had fallen asleep in her bed. She stood leaning against the doorframe, watching his serene face slumber in the dimness. She understood.

Still, she didn’t see why it had to be Tony. Pepper could find someone else to come home to, someone that didn’t leave her drowning in chaos, stumbling to pick up the pieces while holding her heart hostage.

Natasha stayed leaning against the doorframe for a while, thinking about where she had been, and how she’d gotten to this moment now. She had Clint, and god knew she’d never have envisioned this for herself years ago when her hands were dripping red.

Her ribs grew sore as she leaned against the frame, but she stayed there anyway, ruminating

as she watched over Clint's sleeping body.

Chapter End Notes

It's a brief chapter, but it's only the first day and I wanted to get it up and posted. (Not that the rest of this little arc will be day by day but longer chapters than this are to come and Tony will get a chance to prove himself)

That We Thought

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

" 'Tasha," Clint murmured as he awoke in the early morning light. She was already awake, lying beside him in the bed, tapping leisurely at her smart phone. He pushed himself up off of his stomach with his sculpted arms, sitting up. Shifting, Clint moved to rest his back against the headboard. "What time did you come in last night?"

"Hmm," Natasha said. "Maybe three."

"You picked a good day to leave," Clint said. Natasha glanced over at him, raising an eyebrow. "Loki decided that he wanted to 'hang out' with me," Clint said. "I couldn't watch the living room TV because he wouldn't leave me alone. He was like a cat, begging for attention, following me through the common areas. Pretending that he wasn't." Natasha grinned sympathetically. "It wasn't funny," Clint said indignantly. "Maybe he got me confused for Tony," Clint mused.

"Are you telling me he's got a thing for you?" Natasha said lightly.

"No," Clint said, shaking his head with a smirk. "Thank god."

Natasha set her phone down on the bedside table and rolled onto her side, looking up at Clint with her bed head of curls. "Did he say anything interesting?" Clint shook his head. "That's a shame," Natasha said. "I talked to Pepper and I---" She frowned, thinking.

"What?" Clint prompted her, brushing a curl back from her face.

"I wish she'd told me when this had all started, instead of keeping it a secret. I could've talked some sense into her." Natasha gazed up at Clint, thinking. He waited patiently. "She's going to get hurt with Loki involved."

"To say the least," Clint said. He kneaded his hands into his biceps, pensive. "We need to do something."

"I have a handle on what's going on with Pepper. If you focus on getting through to Tony, we might be able to figure this out," Natasha said.

"We need to talk to Loki too," Clint said apprehensively. He glanced over at Natasha, a slow grin on his face. "That's really your department," he said.

"Oh?" Natasha said, grinning deviously. "And why would that be?"

"It's not like you took him down last time or anything," Clint said softly, playing with one of her curls, winding it along his finger. "Miss master assassin," he muttered, leaning down to kiss the top of her head.

She grinned dismissively at the pet name, playfully pushing at Clint's arm. He laughed. "I'll see what I can do," she said.

Loki was sitting at the kitchen table when they walked in, reading a magazine. "Fury must've

dropped those off,” Clint muttered in Natasha’s ear as he walked away from her. She grinned at his joke and made her way over to the table, taking a seat across from Loki. Behind her Clint busied himself by looking through the cabinets for something to cook. He wanted to be near, but he also did not want to get in Natasha’s way.

Natasha did not think that it was going to be difficult.

Loki flipped a page and glanced up at her, one sharp eye visible in profile. It deigned the movement not noteworthy and returned to scanning the page. Natasha waited, closely observing his features. He seemed to be well. There was no evidence of missed sleep or illness. If anything he seemed eager, though that was only by close observation. Otherwise he sat with refined deportment, not letting anything on. “You’ve come to declare your loyalty to Ms. Potts,” Loki said without glancing up.

“And Tony,” Natasha corrected him. “But yes.”

Loki closed the magazine and sat up straight, not looking at her. Instead he watched Clint popping open a box of pasta shells. “You needn’t threaten me,” Loki said dryly. “Ms. Potts and I are in agreement.”

“Go on,” Natasha said.

Loki turned to look at her, condescension riddled through out him. “We are granting Tony the time to make a decision of his own. I have no supernatural hold on him,” Loki said, watching with satisfaction as Clint fumbled with the spoon in his hand. He knew that Clint would accuse him of magical manipulation whether it were true or not. “As for Ms. Potts, I will not threaten her. She is important to Tony.”

“Forgive me if I don’t believe that,” Natasha said.

“You assume so much,” Loki said. “In your human lives my years are well into a thousand. Do you not think that there is some part of me that you do not understand?” Loki set the magazine down on the table. “You met me as a harbinger of war. That is not all that I am.”

“That’s your reason for why we should trust you with our friends?”

“That’s the reason you should recognize it as possible,” Loki said. “I have no intention of harming Ms. Potts,” he repeated. “It would not stand to benefit me. Surely you can see that, Agent Romanov.” Her expression did not change. He leaned in towards her, patronizingly emphasizing his next words, “I rather like Ms. Potts. She is extremely capable in her own right. I understand her appeal to Tony.”

“It is not her fault that she is no match for me,” Loki said with pity, grinning thinly of his own superiority.

Natasha and Clint glanced over for each other’s reactions. Clint looked away with disgust, and returned to stirring the boiling pot.

“You don’t think so?” Natasha said. It was more to jab at him for his smugness than anything else.

There was a split second of a pause before Loki answered. “I am a god,” he reminded her. “As for you Natasha, what is your interest in Ms. Potts? Why should I believe your intentions? Are you truly concerned for her? Or is this merely because Tony’s state inconveniences your team?”

“Don’t even,” Natasha said darkly. “Pepper should not be in this position,” Natasha said. “If you

hadn't forced your way into this, her life wouldn't have changed." Clint set down a bowl of pasta on the table and a stack of plates. Loki glanced up at him before answering.

"Is that not for the better?" Loki said as Clint sat down with them. "And I need not remind you that Tony's desire is mutual."

"What're you doing all of this for?" Clint said, helping himself to a plate of pasta. "Why bother?"

Loki took a plate for himself. He had a bite before he answered Clint. "When Tony chooses me you will see that it is completely of his volition," Loki said. "And cease this suspicion."

Clint glared at him while popping his fork out of his mouth. "That'll never happen."

"That is where you are wrong," Loki said. "It has already begun." He cut the noodles with the side of his fork, routinely spearing them onto the small tines.

Natasha took a bite of pasta. Clint had become a wonderful cook, and she took a moment to tell him so. "Let's say you win," she said to Loki. "What're you going to do then?"

"You're not joining the Avengers," Clint said.

Loki sneered at him. "I am quite content without your band of misfits," he said. Clint and Natasha met eyes again. Band of misfits. It had almost sounded like a Tony-ism. Loki did not answer their question. "Your television program will be starting soon," he told Clint, gesturing towards the clock.

Clint looked to see that he was right. He had finished his plate, as had Natasha. Standing, he picked both of their plates up. Loki held his own plate out to Clint. The archer looked down at the plate for a moment before grabbing it, irritably resigned.

"Are you going to watch it?" Natasha asked Loki. Behind the god she could see Clint's face flip into disagreement. Loki considered the question nonchalantly before inclining his head.

"I suppose," he said.

It was no surprise when he appeared in the common room a while later. Natasha and Clint glanced over at him from where they were seated together on the couch. He sat down in the adjacent chair without saying anything. Natasha felt Clint relax beside her shortly after. She eased in closer to Clint, and saw that Loki had spread out in his chair, his knees below his outstretched hands. She watched him reacting to the television from the corner of her eye, marveling at how peculiar it was to have someone whose guts she would have happily spilled before enjoying downtime in the place she lived.

Chapter End Notes

hopefully it's not too agonizing going along...
more to come, of course.

Something That I Wanted to Give to You

He found Clint standing in the lab when he came down that morning. The archer had his back to the door, and seemed to be deep in thought when Tony saw him in front of the machine. “Lost?” Tony asked.

Clint turned to face him with little expression. “You up for a drive?” He asked casually.

“No,” Tony said tersely, taking a seat in his computer chair loudly, scrapping the wheels along the floor. He booted up a screen, ignoring Clint.

“Fine,” Clint said, walking over to the elevator heavily. Neither man said anything as Clint waited for it to arrive. It was taking forever. Watching the floor indicator lights descend towards the lab was agonizing.

When the doors finally opened Clint stepped in and left without uttering a word. He had the nagging feeling of leaving things unsaid, but he did not care to act on it.

“I can’t say I have,” Steve said, holding his voice level. In his hands was a tube of paint with a rich metallic sheen that reflected blue and gray hues when it touched the canvas. “I don’t think I’ve seen anything like it,” he told Loki.

The god had perched on a stool in the same spot that Tony had been earlier in the week. It was a parallel that did not go unnoticed by Steve. “You may have it,” Loki said, watching closely as Steve tested it on the canvas. “It is rather popular with artisans on Asgard,” he said as he watched the brush pull the paint along in one graceful arc.

“I can see why,” Steve said. Loki’s attentiveness was palpable, and Steve found himself struggling to maintain an air of ease. He turned his focus on the canvas, trying to keep his eye contact minimal. “Thank you,” he said.

Loki shrugged, grinning lightly.

Nervousness impeded his brush movements. Steve didn’t particularly enjoy having someone watch him paint. He could hear Loki breathing beside him.

“Do you draw too?” Steve asked, eager to shift the conversation along.

“No,” Loki said. “Though I enjoy the art.” He crossed one leg on his knee. “You seem to be quite adept.”

“It’s just a hobby,” Steve said.

“Hmm,” Loki murmured with disagreement. Silence fell upon them again. Steve set his brush down and turned towards Loki when he could take it no longer.

“You wanna talk about Tony, don’t you,” he said.

The god’s keen eyes disappeared behind a slow blink as he inclined his head in approval.

“You don’t have to give me something to do that,” Steve said.

"I know," Loki said. He glanced at Steve's canvas and then down along the paint flecked floors. His eyes wandered across the landscapes in various states of completion, the boxing gloves on the windowsill, an old radio by Steve's meticulously made bed. "I was curious," he said, "about your view on the matter."

Steve frowned, not believing him. "It doesn't matter what I think," Steve said. "I told Tony the same thing I'm gonna tell you. Get yourself together." The captain met Loki's eyes fearlessly. He was more exhausted with the situation than anything else at this point. "I don't get either of you," Steve said, turning back to his canvas. "Wasn't born in the right time I guess." He returned to short, fast brush strokes. "There is something I have wondered, though," he said.

"Yes?" Loki asked when Steve's attention did not leave his painting.

"What're you going to do about Thor? Was this all just about Tony?" He painted faster, listening closely. He could hear the rustle of fabric as Loki uncrossed his legs with a faint, frustrated sigh. Loki regarded the captain as the most susceptible and genuine of the group, but Steve's insistent loyalty to Thor still managed to succeed in surprising him.

What answer did Steve long to hear? Why did Steve care so deeply? "Thor and I---" Loki paused. "Are well," he said.

Steve put down the brush. "No," he said. He turned to face Loki. The god was growing defensive. "Are you sure about that?"

"There is much history between us," Loki said, a note of warning in his voice.

"I know," Steve said. "I just, I think back to that morning in the kitchen when you told me that you wanted to better things with him and I---" Anger flared through Steve's good-natured manner as he looked away, "Did you mean any of that?" He said. "Or was it just a lie? Because if you're lying about Tony too---"

"I am not lying," Loki said, emotion flooding the gates of his composure. He licked his lips, reigning himself back in. "My intention toward Tony is genuine," he said, voice softening.

"And Thor?" Steve said, his strained blue eyes zeroed in on Loki.

The god's shoulders had tensed perceptibly, forming sharp angles beneath his brooding face. "Tony's fate will not be his," Loki said. "They are not the same."

"But were you lying?" Steve asked. "Were all those things between you and him an act?"

"No," Loki said, leaning in towards Steve. "In his sentiment he longs for more than I can give." He drew in a heavy breath, steadying himself. He needed Steve to believe him. He needed Steve on his side. "Is there perhaps something you wish to discuss between Thor and I?"

Steve relaxed. "No," he said. "I just needed to know if this was all a game." He scratched his head, letting his short blond hair bristle back in the movement. A smile of disbelief lit his face. "Things are so much more complicated than I imagined that they could be." The captain's mind wandered to thoughts of his childhood and simplicity briefly.

Loki was not entirely sure what Steve was referring to, but he could appreciate the idea. He was lost in his own thoughts when he heard the man's voice abruptly. "I don't think I ever got to really say thanks for the fireworks at my birthday," Steve said. "That was amazing," he said. "How'd you do it?"

Loki's hand curled across his chin. "Applied science," he said, removing his hand and gesturing softly. "As you would call it."

"You can call it magic," Steve said, grinning. "I'm not going to know the difference." The captain was fascinating Loki today. He tilted his head towards the man, smiling with intrigue.

"Magic then," Loki said.

He stayed with Steve for a good hour longer, listening to the captain's stories of life on Midgard before Tony's age.

"That's a luxury for ordinary people," Clint was arguing vehemently when the elevator doors opened. Bruce glanced uncomfortably between him and Natasha.

"I'll catch it on the way back," Bruce said.

"Don't worry about it," Natasha ordered him. Hesitantly he stepped in, careful to keep his distance from them.

"All I'm saying is that ordinarily, yes, that would be okay. But we don't get to make mistakes," Clint said, pressing the door close button and ignoring Bruce. "When we make mistakes people die."

Natasha glared at the wall. She'd crossed her arms and leaned back, tapping one foot irritably. "Wouldn't be the first time," she said. "What floor?" She asked Bruce.

"I was going to check in on Tony," he muttered.

"How is he?" Clint asked.

"Fine," Bruce said. "Enough." His eyes wandered away from them as he spoke. "I feel for him," Bruce said. "I can't wait for this whole thing to be over," he said, impatient to escape the elevator.

"Yeah," Clint agreed. Bruce reached over and hit the floor for the common room. The doors opened on the next floor.

"I'll talk to you later," he said, stepping out. He heard Clint's voice rising again as the doors closed. Hawkeye's tension had sky rocketed in the past few days, although Bruce wasn't completely sure why. He figured that Tony would work things out and life would return to as close to normal as a group like them could hope to have. The couch sank in as he sat down, killing time. He'd wait a while, until he was certain that Natasha and Clint had gone to another floor. Then he would check on Tony.

Things That I'd Wondered

Tony pinched the bridge of his nose and leaned back, away from the computer screen. There was plenty that he could work on in the program, but he was losing the drive to. He'd rather go upstairs, pour himself a glass, and pass out on the couch. It wasn't a possibility, however. The team was keeping far too close a watch on him for that. The last thing he wanted was to hear Bruce's soft, compassionate voice bristle with irritation as he directed Tony's inebriated body to his bed.

His hand hovered over the keyboard for a moment, and then he decided to power the computer down. Tony Stark was remembering weekends alone and truly quiet nights with frequency now. It had been a long time since he had been completely on his own.

After a few days, Tony had stopped thinking about Pepper and Loki. Or at least, he had tried to. It was difficult, if not impossible. It was also painful, which was why he was avoiding it.

Instead, his thoughts had turned on the team. They had been checking on him with nauseating frequency, and he had spent several days practically glued to Bruce, visiting every clinic in town on the doctor's volunteer runs.

Tony stood up from the computer desk. In his weariness, he knocked something onto the floor. There was a clang and then the dull run of metal rolling across the floor. He stooped over, picking up a button pin.

It was a campaign badge that had been given to Pepper at a business conference, years ago. He turned over the metal disk, recalling when she had placed it into his hands, rolling her eyes with a dismissive smile. It had just been a piece of junk, a bit of advertising handed out to everyone that walked by. But he had kept it because he had let Pepper slip it into his hand, just to feel her skin brush against him. She hadn't known about all of his quirks then, or really, much about him at all. She was so much younger in the memory, so bright eyed and relaxed.

The pin was still in his hands when he heard the doors open.

"I'm heading downtown," Bruce said, walking in. "We can pick up something to eat after I make a stop."

"I have an errand to run too," Tony said, setting the pin down on the desk. He grabbed a thick folder.

"Alright," Bruce said. Tony slipped the folder under his arm and quickened his pace. Bruce stuck to safe subjects as usual through out the day, and Tony did not challenge him.

At least, not until they had returned to the tower later that night. Bruce had just put the car into park when Tony spoke up. "I want to know what's on the agenda," he said.

"The agenda for what?" Bruce asked, honestly confused.

"For me and Loki," Tony said. "I know you've had meetings about us and I want to know what they're about. I think I have a right to," Tony said.

He heard Bruce sigh loudly beside him. The leather seats groaned as he moved uncomfortably. Bruce had not taken off his seatbelt yet. He rested his hands back on the steering wheel. "I don't know that there's an agenda," he said.

Tony turned to look at him, his eyes like steel from the frame of dark hair around his face. "I know there is," Tony said. "I'm just asking what you're planning to do to Loki."

"What we're planning to do to him?" Bruce said skeptically. "I don't think anyone's planning to do anything," Bruce said. "We had a hard enough time with him in New York. I don't see a point in antagonizing the guy again."

"Oh?" Tony said sarcastically.

"Look," Bruce said. "To be fair, Loki is a war criminal, and he's been living with us. That is tense enough. Now that you're in the line of fire, that just makes things complicated."

"I am not in the line of fire," Tony said.

"Are you sure about that?" Bruce said. "What do you think Loki will do to you? Do you really think you can trust him?"

Tony grinned unkindly. "I can handle myself, I don't need you holding my hand."

"If it were anyone else," Bruce said, "I wouldn't get involved. But it's Loki."

"Isn't it better though," Tony argued, "doesn't this work out for the Avengers? Loki's not an enemy anymore. He's with me."

"It's not that simple," Bruce said quietly.

"It is," Tony said. His arm was resting against the closed window. He glanced around the garage, fighting with himself. He wanted Bruce to be on his side. Aside from Rhodey, Bruce was one of his closest friends. He hadn't even told Rhodey about what had been going on. He was busy with official government business, and Tony knew he wouldn't approve. There was no need to worry him. The car was making him feel panicky. He pulled his arm away from the window, trying to slow his breathing. "I need you guys to believe me," Tony said. "I need you." He said it because the anxiety was making it impossible to conceal. He popped open the car door, letting the hinges keep it ajar.

"Tony," Bruce said. "Just think about things."

"That's the problem," Tony said, brushing away the seatbelt he'd already unlatched. "I can't stop thinking about them."

In the dim lighting of the garage Tony's face was more angular and nervous than usual. Long shadows curled down his face, contrasting against the gleam in his distracted eyes. "Hey," Bruce said. "I'm not trying to put you on trial," he said.

Tony rubbed the back of his neck and then his face, brushing along his beard. "I won't let anything happen to any of you. Not Loki, not Pepper, not anyone on the team." Bruce sat in silence, watching him fidget. "All of you are freaking out and it's because of me," Tony said.

Bruce undid his seatbelt and pulled the keys out of the ignition. "Tony," Bruce said quietly.

"You've gotta understand what this looks like outside of you. The guy that came and left hundreds dead in his wake is now your significant other. The same guy that you nearly died trying to stop." Bruce squinted as he looked out the windshield, grasping for a way to say it. "I trust you Tony, but I don't trust him. And if he does anything to you, I'm not going to be able to live with it."

"He wouldn't be able to live with himself either," Tony said, his voice cracking. He thought back

to the night that he had walked in on Loki's nightmare. Then he recalled Loki's soft voice whispering across his ear, his tenderness when they were alone. He had tried so hard to remember what Loki had said to him the last time they had been together, but it was futile.

Tony stepped out of the car. He looked over at Bruce, whose head and shoulders appeared over the roof of the car as he got out. "I know things are hard," Bruce said quietly. Tony stared at him, and Bruce could decipher nothing in the intensity of what he was thinking. His friend smiled cheerlessly and nodded, anxiously, turning away to walk back.

Bruce found Natasha and Clint talking in the kitchen a while later. The archer lit up when he saw the man, and gestured for him to sit down.

"We've got insurance," Clint said, leaning across the table. "We can stop him."

"What?" Bruce asked.

"The machine that you sold to SHIELD," Natasha said. "It traps things, right?"

"That's a bad idea," Bruce said. "Not only would Thor kill you, but so would Tony."

"He's right," Natasha said to Clint, seizing the opportunity to have someone else agreeing with that sentiment.

"Loki might not be controlling his mind," said Clint. "But I saw inside Loki's head. I know what that guy is capable of. The things that he was planning to do to you and me Nat---" The words vanished from his breath. The man did not want to say them out loud. He didn't want to hear such awful things in his own voice.

"I know," Natasha said, staring down at the table.

"Tony's valuable," Clint said. "He's a genius. He's fucking brilliant. Loki could use him. Hell, how do we know that's not what's going on? As soon as Tony's fulfilled his purpose, Loki'll drop him like garbage. Then it'll be New York all over again. Except we won't have Tony. We'll be fighting Tony. That's what the bastard wanted last time anyway."

Bruce combed his hand through his hair, frowning uncomfortably. "You didn't see anything in his head that made you think that he could be---"

"Kind?" Clint said incredulously. "Excuse me if I wasn't looking. Listen. Tony's a good guy but sometimes he thinks he can throw himself on the line for everyone else and it blinds him. He thinks he can save everyone. He can't. I'm not losing him and I'm not letting Loki use him."

"And if Tony actually loves him?" Bruce asked.

Frustration swept over Clint. "He's soft," Clint said. "And he's blind in how reckless he gets." He flexed anxiously. "Tony might've forgiven Loki for New York, but I never will."

They sat in silence for a minute.

"Tony is valuable," Natasha said. "Loki is complex. We don't know everything we're dealing with on him. He's a god," she said. "We don't even know how that works."

She brushed her hair back over her shoulder. "We're lucky we have Thor on our side. He's the only one that understands what we're dealing with. And he's not here."

“We’d better figure it out before he gets back,” Clint said.

“This is really Tony’s decision,” Bruce said. “He needs us.”

“Yeah, he does,” Clint said. “He doesn’t even see what’s happening.”

“We don’t see what’s happening,” Natasha argued. “We’ve been trying to figure out Loki for months and it took him telling us.”

“Guys,” Bruce said. “Let’s just give Tony some time before we do anything else.”

“What if it’s too late?” Clint asked. “I’m not gonna sit here while he keeps weaving a web around Tony. It’s one thing to humor Thor,” Clint said. “It’s another thing to sit back and watch Loki mess with Tony’s head.”

Tony’s conversation in the car drifted across Bruce’s mind again. “I don’t trust Loki either,” Bruce said. “But if we force him out of Tony’s life, Tony will get hurt. Tony’s going through a lot right now. Let’s not make it harder.”

“Not to mention that trapping Loki would enrage Thor and probably Asgard,” Natasha said to Clint. “We don’t have the resources to handle that.”

“Thor is Tony’s friend too,” Clint said. “Do you think he’ll sit back? He’ll stand up for Tony.”

“I don’t know,” Bruce said. “I don’t think it’s a good idea.”

Natasha crossed her arms across her stomach. “I’ve done terrible things too,” she said. “I didn’t feel remorse as I did them. I’m still here. Loki could be the same.”

“But you’re you,” Clint said. Natasha glanced over at him, and then back at the table. She did not agree with him.

“Loki could have a ledger,” Natasha said simply.

“I doubt it,” Clint said.

The conversation ended there, but the trio drifted into more mundane topics for a while longer before they parted ways. Bruce could not shake Tony’s face from his head.

In the early morning, Tony woke up in his bed. For a while he stared at the ceiling, until it became agonizing. Everyone was just floors above and below him. He wondered if Loki was awake, pacing his floor or reading. He wondered if Pepper was sleeping, or if she was just as wide eyed as he was, watching black and white sitcoms like she always did when she could not sleep. The sheets rustled as he got out of bed. Tony decided to go down into the lab for a few hours.

That was when he found that the machine he’d built from Loki’s translated Asgardian book was in pieces on the floor. It had been crudely dismantled, and upon closer inspection, Tony realized that parts were missing. It was unsalvageable. SHIELD may have bought the informational technology on the machine, but this one was never going to run again. Tony looked for clues on who it had been, but the security feed had been wiped clean and there was no trace of the culprit.

The Time That Came for Us

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

It was midnight. This was not exactly late by her standards, but considering her daily routine, it meant that she would only have a few hours of sleep to run on tomorrow. Still, falling asleep had been proving impossible. Her mind insisted on continuing its dull stream of nagging, pestering her mercilessly.

Pepper had spent several hours in the bath that evening. The hot water had bubbled in around her, milky with oatmeal and honey. It lapped all the way up to her shoulders in the deep tub. She'd closed her eyes and listened to the radio play, nearly falling asleep. Now she was still warm and contented from the water even as she laid in bed, dressed in soft, light gray pajamas. She pulled the plush comforter in closer, tucking it in around her. The television was the only light in her otherwise dark room, and it only flickered in shades of gray, presenting a program from before color television.

Her head was heavy against the pillow. She could feel her eyes languidly trail the actors on screen. Perhaps she could fall asleep now. Her eyelids were so very heavy, after all. She closed them. Instead it felt like entrapment. Her body needed sleep, it cried for sleep, but her mind would not allow it.

There was a faint creak at the door. Her eyes snapped open, seeking the source of the noise. It was far too dark to make out anything. All she could see was the varying shadows as the TV flickered its monochrome display, chatting away softly in highs and lows of recorded laughter. The door began opening, sending her heart flying.

She shot up in bed. "Pep, Pep, it's fine," a familiar voice said.

"Tony?" She said, tilting her head incredulously. He stepped into the room, smiling apologetically. He was still dressed in jeans and a t-shirt, and carried a folder under his arm. "You're not supposed to be in here."

"When have you known me to follow the rules?" He said quietly, shrugging. "Mind if I sit?" He asked, gesturing towards the other side of the bed.

"Go ahead," she said. He walked around the bed and glanced down at the spot beside her before slowly sitting down. The comforter crinkled as he sat on top of it, leaning back against the headboard. Pepper pulled herself out of her cocoon, sitting upright. "What is it," she said softly.

He was watching the TV, stalling for time. "I knew you'd be up," he said. "Sorry you're losing sleep."

"I'm not the only one," she said. Tony smiled sorrowfully, vaguely nodding his head.

"Yeah," he said. "You must've seen every episode of I Love Lucy by now," he said.

"Probably," Pepper said. She reached out for the remote. The mute symbol appeared on the television, sucking the comfortable background chatter from the air. Silence billowed into its place. Tony was fidgeting with the folder in his hands, running his thumb back and forth across the covering. Inside she saw that there was a thick stack of papers, and her mind was making connections that she wished it wouldn't.

Tony was still watching the soundless TV, unable to speak. She saw a familiar switch flip in his eyes and he turned back to her, determined to let whatever it was out. "Pepper," Tony said. His voice was low and pleading. "I love you."

"Tony I---"

"I need you to know that, Pep. You're the one that's kept me together all these years," he said. Tony's eyes gleaned in the dull light, intense and focused. "I love you in a way I don't deserve to." She shifted uncomfortably in the bed, uncertainty taking hold of her. When she didn't answer him he held out the folder to her.

"What's this?" She said quietly, taking it from him. Flipping it open revealed a thick legal document. At a glance she saw Tony's signature and a blank line beside it.

"You deserve this, Pepper. I want you to have it."

"Tony---" Pepper said, realization sinking in like a dead weight. "I can't take this from you---"

"You're not taking anything," Tony said. "I'm giving it to you. It never would have gotten where it is without you. It's yours too," he said. "It's practically the child we never had," he said in a whisper.

"Tony," Pepper said, looking up at him from the document. "You're not---what are you going to do?"

"I'll still be on the board of trustees," Tony said.

"No," she said, her voice betraying sorrow, "what are you going to do? You're not staying here? He's not staying?"

Tony shook his head. "I don't think he's ever had the intention of staying here," he said quietly. "I don't know," he said, "but keeping up with him will make running this practically impossible."

Salt hit her lips, but she said nothing. The folder slid gently onto the bedside table. Tony's head stayed down in the dim, flickering light. "I thought about what you said, Pepper," he said quietly. "About what's best for me. And what's best for you." Her hand brushed across her cheek. "You don't deserve to pick up the pieces all the time, Pepper. I love you, but I'm not good for you."

Her quiet, accepting sniffle sounded a thousand times louder in the hushed room. Now that it was finally happening, as aching and miserable as it was, she was also relieved. She'd been dreading this for so long that it was almost welcomed. "I love you Tony," she said simplistically. She could hear his uneasy breathing beside her, but she took her time in raising her head to look at him.

Finally they both met eyes. Tony's face was wet too, and he felt the searing heat of another tear roll down along his rough cheek and into his stubble. "I am always going to love you," he said, deeply, raw, from a broken corner of his heart.

She reached out and brushed away one of his tears with her thumb. "I know," she said. "If circumstances had been different," she said quietly, cupping her hands together, "we might have made it. But," she said, pulling in a heavy breath, "I think we missed our chance years ago. Life pulled us in two different directions."

"We made it a long time," Tony said. "Not for lack of trying."

He saw a thin smile cross her lips that her teeth quickly snatched and bit down on. "If we'd had an

ordinary life without all the..." Her voice trailed off. "But I would've been bored to death."

"You and me both," Tony said. He noticed her loose, air-dried hair lying flippantly across her shoulders and mournfully recognized it as the last time he'd probably see her like this.

"You know, I'm waiting for you to throw something at me," Tony said softly. That familiar smirk of disbelief greeted him.

"You'd probably deserve it," she said. "But you also don't." A loud, heavy sigh left her chest as her eyes wandered across the dark room.

"I was angry," Pepper said quietly. "But I've had my own time to think. We've tried so long and so hard to make this work. Things have never been easy between us," she said, the comforter rustling as she shifted in the bed, "but that hasn't been because we don't love each other."

"I still---" she glanced away, over towards the TV. Tony watched her flushed face change in the shifting light as she watched the silenced program. "I still don't like you being with Loki," she said. "But maybe now that's just because he's not me. It could have been anyone," she said quietly. "It's just our time."

"But I think he knows that I will kill him if he does anything to you," she said with a wry grin.

"He likes you," Tony said, "in his own way."

"I know," Pepper said. "We have an understanding." She leaned back against the headboard, closing her eyes. Though her heart ached, she felt lighter now. Released. It had been so difficult living in between, waiting on Tony. Even when she'd believed things would turn out differently.

She felt Tony's hand wrap around her cold fingers. His dark mahogany eyes were haunted by spindles of red blood vessels. "I'm sorry," Tony said.

"Me too," Pepper answered.

He leaned forward on the bed, and she closed her eyes. His lips met hers slowly, letting the weight sink in gradually, their mouths parting with bittersweet melancholy, drawing out the farewell. She felt the spark snuff out like a dying ember the instant that her mouth was her own again, and she knew that his kiss would never set fire to her again. They stayed holding hands, but neither said anything for a long while. It was Pepper that spoke first. "Who knows?"

"Only you," Tony said. "I wouldn't let you find out any other way."

"Please be careful Tony," Pepper said. "And take care of yourself."

"I will," he said, squeezing her hand. "I won't make you worry about me anymore, Pepper."

"That'll never change," she said. "I'm always going to worry about you."

Half a smile claimed his mouth but he said nothing. When their hands finally parted and he felt cool air greet his skin where hers had been, he knew that door was forever closed. Pepper would still be in his life, but they would never look at each other the same way again.

"Sign those papers, Pepper," Tony said. "I want you to." Her cloudy blue eyes met his, but she didn't say anything. She just nodded. "Our company is safe with you."

"What will you do about Iron Man?" She asked.

“I haven’t figured that out yet,” Tony said. “You come first.”

She watched him turn away, rising off the bed reluctantly. His shoulders hunched as he walked around the bed towards her door, blocking out the flashing light for an instant, casting a dark shadow over the bed. Tony stopped in the doorway, hesitating. He tapped his fist against the doorframe, drumming out a faint knock. The heartache was already setting in, but he also felt okay, like he was doing the right thing. Pepper was staring at him with a certain, resigned softness.

“Is that all, Mr. Stark?” She asked quietly.

“Yes, Ms. Potts,” he said softly back, a tenderness in his eyes.

It took an eternity to turn away from her in the door and go the other way. His feet carried him to the elevator like he was outside of himself, trailing behind. Tony was not surprised when he found Bruce waiting inside the elevator. “Yeah, I broke the rules,” he said.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Bruce said. “I’m just responding to a notice from Jarvis that you’re on this floor. Seems like he’s malfunctioned,” he said airily, glancing around.

Tony grinned and crossed his arms, leaning back against the wall.

“You wouldn’t happen to know if Tony needs to talk about anything?” Bruce asked. “When I find out what floor he’s on?”

“I think he could go for a coffee run, if you’re looking for him,” Tony said.

“Huh,” Bruce said. “Because I was just about to go look for him at the coffee shop on 42nd.”

“You’ll probably find him,” Tony said. He stared up at the fluorescent lighting above him, thanking a god he didn’t believe in that it was Bruce who’d responded.

Chapter End Notes

remember when chapters were about Clint getting Rapunzel hair and Steve teaching Loki to use TV remotes hahaha /_ • ;;;

it'll be okay

Something That I'd Overlooked

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Tony had become far too well acquainted with his ceiling. He had spent enough time staring at it to recall each boring detail without fail. Though he had stayed busy, he found himself lying in bed more and more, trying to ride out the emotions in him as though he were a tiny boat on a turbulent sea. He did not regret his decision about Pepper, but he was still aching, like waiting for new skin to grow beneath a scab. His articulate eyes traced the floor above him methodically as he imagined how he was going to tell Loki. He wanted to tell the god first, alone, not in the presence of the team.

Loki had been playing this by the rules because it suited him, not because he cared to observe them. He had eloquently worked his way through the team, winning over Steve and then Bruce. Loki wasn't even sure what he'd done to win Bruce. A night ago the man had showed up on his floor, taken a seat in one of his chairs, and calmly asserted that if he heard even the slightest whisper that Loki had harmed Tony in any way, he would see to the god's demise himself. They had been simple enough terms for Loki to accept. Bruce had left just as quickly as he came, though Loki tried to entice him into staying and discussing Midgardian culture again. Bruce would have none of it. He had seen it for what it really was now, a way of getting closer to him. Bruce just wanted the whole ordeal be over.

That left only Natasha and Clint, and Loki was well aware that the later one was a lost cause. Natasha, however, could be reasoned with.

He spotted her head of radiant red curls first, cascading over the back of a chair in the common room where she was reading a book. "Hello," she said, not moving. It seemed that he could not sneak up on her.

"Good evening Agent Romanov," he said, taking a seat on the white sofa across from her. He leaned forward, resting his head on his laced fingers, elbows on wide set knees. Loki glanced down at the book she was reading. The language on the spine was one that he did not recognize. Tony would've told him it was in Russian.

"Yeah?" She said, turning a page. Her limber body laid leisurely along the couch, comfortably reclined.

He smiled incredulously, glancing away. "Shall I be concise then?" He asked.

"You want my approval for you and Tony," she said. Her eyes had stopped scanning the page. She was listening intently instead.

"Not even that," Loki said. "Acceptance would suffice."

"Well, you're both adults," she said, closing the book. "Is it really that important to you?" Her eyes narrowed, glimmering with self-assurance. "Or do you need me?"

Loki's grin was wicked. "Precisely," he said.

"I can't change Clint's mind for you," Natasha said, sitting up. She set the book down beside her.

“Maybe you should work on that.”

She listened to the faint sigh that parted from him as he leaned away from her. “I doubt you see any more possibility there than I do,” he said. He saw he was right in her eyes. “Though I do wish to make my case to you.”

“No you don’t,” she said, leaning in towards him. He wasn’t going to get anything past her. The fluorescent light slipped along the rounder features in her face, making her look uncharacteristically at ease. “You don’t need my approval, or my acceptance,” she said, her voice not unkind. Natasha’s lips pursed minutely as she considered something. “But you want them,” she said, her voice breaking between a question and amusement.

“I do not need them,” Loki said, propping his head up with one hand. He leaned into his elbow against the couch arm, smiling faintly. He had come before her dressed in tight black jeans and a navy cotton t-shirt with faded gold lettering. Natasha recognized the argument in this, and admired his craftiness. Loki did not deny the second part of her statement.

“Go on and admit it then,” Natasha said. “Tell me you’ve enjoyed this. It amused you.”

His teeth glinted in a smile that promised nothing, but confessed agreeability none the less. She rolled her eyes at him, tucking her own smile back. “You’re not off the hook,” she said.

Loki realized for the first time that Natasha had a far better understanding of him than any of Tony’s comrades. She saw his threat clearly, but she did not shy from it like the others. She would confront it, she would question it, she would challenge him mercilessly, but she did not dismiss him entirely. This woman had recognized that he was holding onto something before all the rest, and even more than that, she understood that he could find delight in the chaos they were in now.

To the others, he was simply a threat. To Natasha he was still a threat, but a complex one, and she had so much blood on her hands that the squeamishness of that had left long ago. She could be diligent while enjoying his company. She had accepted Loki.

Loki knew that his danger was a part of that.

“You don’t really think that I think Tony is making the wisest choices, do you?” She asked. There was nothing antagonistic about it. She was simply letting him know that his past had not escaped her.

“I know that you and Ms. Potts are quite close,” Loki said.

“Yes,” Natasha said, suspicion flickering across her eyes.

“So,” he said, leaning forward again, “I would understand if you begrudged me---”

“No,” Natasha said, cutting him off. “She’s better without him,” she mumbled. She wasn’t sure if she should be telling Loki that. He nodded his head, pressing his lips together as he did.

“I agree,” Loki said, his voice suggesting that there was much more that he would like to say on the subject. Her expression implied that she thought he was rather biased on that. “But as for Tony and I,” he said, his words lowering down softly. “For Tony’s sake, I am telling you not to consider me as your enemy. I will not bring harm to Tony.”

“Just Tony then,” she said. He shook his head. Natasha knew that meant that nothing else was off the table.

“And your team,” he said.

Natasha laid across the couch again, throwing her legs back up on the seat cushions. She crossed her hands over her stomach, staring straight forward distantly as she spoke. “Loki, you are something else entirely.”

“Of course,” Loki said, indignantly, arrogantly, still breaking into a tiny laugh at the end as though he had been kidding.

“I won’t make any promises to you,” she said. “You’ll just have to keep them.” Her fingers drummed against each other softly. “There was one thing I wanted to ask though.”

“Oh?” He said, inclining his head towards her.

“What was going through your head during all those team building activities?”

Loki grinned. He reached one hand down to adjust the cotton t-shirt along his side. “I have endured far worse than a few dull party games, Agent Romanov.”

She smiled. An uninhibited, true smile. Loki gazed at the clever woman and thought what a shame it was that she was restricted to this mortal sphere. Had he gotten her, and not her partner, perhaps the invasion would have succeeded. Anger sparked in him as he remembered that it had been Natasha that had so crudely rammed his scepter into the beam and closed the portal. He took in a breath. He had gotten something far better than the invasion. He saw that now. If only Tony would hurry and choose him.

Natasha picked her book back up again. Truly, Loki thought, it was a shame that he had underestimated her then. “I do mean what I have said about Tony,” Loki said softly, rising up from the chair. She glanced up at him, saying nothing. An edgy, yet comfortable camaraderie of knowing the walk along darker paths existed between them. Loki would miss her subtle wit when it was all over. He turned from her, walking away with pride in his step. He would keep that promise.

Below them, in his room, Tony rolled over onto his side, rehearsing the words in his head again and again as he laid in bed.

Chapter End Notes

Yes, the next chapter will be *the* chapter between Tony and Loki. I'm going to take a little time to get it just right, so this is a little something in the meantime. As always, thank you for reading. ♥

That At Last I Know

The god had curled himself into his high backed raven armchair, with his long legs extended out onto the ottoman before him. As opposed to his usual books, however, he had one of Tony's tablets in his hands. He had been playing an arcade shooter game for the past few hours, taking out space ship after space ship on the small screen. It was well past midnight now, and beyond him he could see the geometric glow of city lights out the windows. The flowing river of crystalline rods still hung above him, illuminating the room with a soft haze. Music was playing faintly, in low and steady jazz rhythms. The usual flicker of lurking melancholy persisted in the room nonetheless, though the murky illumination made it eerily inviting, as though the room itself was waiting to lean in and share an intimate secret.

Loki had hit the last level of the game. He heard the elevator doors sliding open, but he ignored them, assuming that it was one of Tony's cohorts coming in to speak with him. They could wait. He had been waiting to annihilate this Midgardian game all night.

He sensed someone sitting down into the chair beside him heavily. Thirty seconds and he would look up. Irritably he flicked his finger across the screen, sending the last star ship spiraling down into oblivion, presenting him with a new high score. Satisfied, he leaned forward to set the tablet down on the ottoman and nearly dropped it when, from the corner of his eye, he saw that it was Tony.

"Hey," the man said, focusing in on him. Tony's earthy eyes struck Loki's attention first. The man was exceptionally lucid and calm. Loki's face had frozen in surprise. "It's past midnight," Tony said.

Loki's expression hardened into an indecipherable mask.

"That means the last day is up," Tony said.

Loki's neck straightened as he sat up rigidly in the chair, unable to read what was going on in Tony. Was the man happy? Apologetic? Loki could sense nothing aside from his acute eagerness. Otherwise, his ease was unnerving. "I had assumed sunrise determined that," Loki said.

"Not here," Tony said, grinning his usual assured smile. He leaned on the edge of his armchair, resting his hand on his head towards Loki. A smoky amber and vague orange citrus scent hung faintly around Tony. It was not too much, nor too little. It was just enough to invite Loki to lean in closer to him, to whisper reminders of Tony's talent for brazen confidence.

Now that Tony was beside him, Loki was discovering that he did not have the same brand of confidence that Tony seemed to have. Though he had played out the scenario of Tony's confession through a myriad of incarnations in his mind, none of them had begun with Tony showing up unexpectedly. Loki's olive cotton v-neck and dark jeans made him feel uncomfortably underdressed for any of the scenarios he had imagined.

Tony, meanwhile, was congratulating himself internally for his timing. There was something irresistibly alluring about Loki when he allowed himself to be seen at ease, in the little moments where he wasn't putting on a show for anyone. A lock of his slick black hair had broken free of its conditioning and curled wildly into a jagged wave, completely unbeknownst to him. Tony's eyes kept falling back on it with reverence. He wanted to run it between his fingers and watch it coil back like a ribbon as it broke loose from his grip.

Loki had gone rigid, and he was viciously cursing himself for it. Getting a fit of nerves was beneath him. He should be pulling Tony in around him, breaking moans from the man as his white tailored shirt was yanked down his broad shoulders. Instead, he heard the whimpering plea of rejection creeping in upon him, and with his unforgiving fear he anticipated falling, as though he was going to be denied the life he wanted once more. The cosmos flashed before his eyes.

Tony saw that Loki was stiff, but he could not place why exactly. Tony was already trooping through a bombardment of conflicting emotion. The reverie of anticipation. Relief. The dull ache of parting that had not completely left him yet. Uncertainty. Excitement. Joy for the future. It was all that he could do to direct that flood into one unwavering need to move from the unsettled state they had been in to something completely tangible.

He reached out his hand, taking the cold fingers of Loki's right hand in his warm palm. The god did not look up at him, and dread beat upon Tony's heart. What if Loki had changed his mind?

Still, there was nothing else to do. "Before I say anything," Tony's warm, grounded voice said, "I want you to know that this is it. There's no bullshitting around."

Loki's heart stilled. He felt ice lodging in his veins like icebergs in the arctic coming together. Tony's eyes drifted away towards the intricate ceiling. It was unsettling how still Loki was, how set his face was as his untamable green eyes stayed unwavering upon the same spot on the lush carpet.

"If you meant everything you said Loki, if I'm going to do this," Tony said, his voice cantering along with urgency, "then I can't keep turning to look back over my shoulder. If I'm going to leave this behind with you, I need to know that you want to make this work too."

Loki's eyes snapped up, their pupils set ablaze within verdant rings. He had started to breathe again. "Stark, does this mean---?"

"Yes," Tony said. He let go of Loki's hand and sat back in his chair. "Yes it does." He let his eyes wander over Loki then, calculating what was going on in the immortal's head. The god's shoulders had dropped, and his lips had parted, ever so minutely. It would have gone unnoticed by anyone but Tony. Loki wasn't answering him. "I want to be with you," Tony said.

It was silent. "Shit," Tony said in a whisper after a moment. He made to move from his chair when Loki's arm stopped him, resting firmly on his shoulder. The god's heart was beating in drunken thumps. His head was spinning.

Tony took the invitation for what it was, relieved. He leaned forward from his chair, engulfing Loki in his warm scent, brushing his lips up Loki's pale face, placing his hand at the god's throat to gently tilt Loki's head towards him. "This is the part where you say something," Tony whispered in his ear.

He pulled back from Loki, his face mere inches away. Loki's eyes were absolutely fervent, intense with radiant emotion. There was such immensity there as Tony had never seen before.

Loki could not remember the last time he had won. He could not, for the life of him, remember the last time that something had gone his way. That he gotten what he wanted. That happiness should come to him...it was...excruciating. When was the last time that someone had returned his love? Yearned honestly for him? As himself, not anything else, and definitely not a means to an end?

He'd had no idea of what he had been holding onto until now, with Tony so close, so utterly his. No understandings that it was a temporary arrangement, or that it was purely physical, or that Loki

wasn't a priority. Tony was absolutely, completely before him, asking for him.

His fingers dug down into Tony's shoulder, urgent not to let him go. Tony looked at Loki, and then with a shrug and an indulgent smile, he leaned in completely, the wing of the armchair digging into his stomach as their heads tilted to allow their lips to meet. The groan Tony drew from Loki was absolutely wicked. It was loud and obscene, a whimper and a needy moan of desire all at once that Tony could not stop himself from grinning over. His tongue teased its way across Loki's sensitive mouth, baiting out another desperate, hungry moan. Loki's nails scratched down his back, snagging along his shirt. Tony pulled back from him, though he was only able to gain a few inches as Loki held tight.

"There's something you still need to say," Tony said, grinning devilishly.

"Yes Stark," Loki moaned out with a whine. He was utterly overcome with lust and practically pouting at the delay. With amusement Tony dragged the moment out, moving his lips just out of reach. He had spotted the errant curl again. "I will be yours," Loki snarled, rolling his eyes up and away.

"Loki," Tony said in singsong, smiling beguilingly. His eyes were soft and bright beneath his half open eyelids. He reached up and brushed Loki's hair back behind his ear.

"What is it?" Loki said, his arms resting over Tony's shoulders. The man was grinning, completely enamored.

"We should move," Tony said, gesturing down at their parallel armchairs. Loki closed his eyes and reached out, vanishing them into the bedroom in a heartbeat. He pulled Tony down on top of him, eager to press his lips to Tony's neck. He was desperate to lose himself and forget the exposure he'd felt just moments ago. He needed Tony over him, around him, flooding every sense that he had, and he need it *now*. Still, he could sense that Tony was holding back, and it frustrated him agonizingly.

"Tony," Loki said, popping open a button on Tony's dress shirt. "What possibly," he said, sucking hard at the exposed clavicle, "could you be thinking about," he gasped. Tony's hands came down around his head, and he felt a lock of hair twirl around Tony's finger. The man's eyes were focused on it, privately lost in his own thoughts. Loki returned to unbuttoning the man's shirt, ignoring whatever it was that was going through Tony's mind. Loki tugged at the shirt, unable to take it off with Tony's arms down around him. "Stark," Loki said. "What is it?"

Tony pulled his chest up and away, creating a friction between their hips that was unbearable. His shirt came away in the movement, slipping down his back as Loki maintained his hold on the collar. He let go as Tony pulled his arms out, on the verge of saying something. The white shirt crumpled onto the ground as Tony threw it away from him, Loki's hands falling onto the caramel colored sheets with a dull thud.

"Don't you want to know," Tony said, thrusting his hips as he did and watching with satisfaction as Loki's lips twitched in pleasure, "why?"

Loki's hair had fanned out onto the plush pillow around his questioning face. His pale skin was flushed with pink, and his collarbone was peeking out from the disheveled olive v-neck. Tony slipped his fingers down past the waist of Loki's jeans, pressing his thumbs down hard along Loki's hipbone. "What?" Loki asked quietly.

Tony unbuttoned the top of Loki's jeans. The groan of the zipper coming down sounded infinitely louder than it actually was. "Loki," Tony said, leaning down and kissing his neck. He sat back up,

thrusting his hips down again as he did. Loki felt Tony's hands slide along his sides and pull the t-shirt up. He moved his arms obligingly, now bare-chested with his pants undone. He thrust up against Tony challengingly, but Tony did not waver. Instead the man smiled down at him, reckless and self-assured at once. He began undoing his own jeans slowly, then moved aside to take them off completely and toss them to the floor. The bulge of his hard cock was obvious beneath his silk boxers, but he did not take them off. Loki was still waiting to hear his answer.

Tony crawled down onto the bed beside Loki, laying flat on his stomach. His hand wandered down Loki's stomach and down into his boxers, slowly feeling his fingers down the stiff erection there. "Well first," he whispered against the god's ear, "two like us," he whispered, "can't be stopped."

Loki kicked at his jeans, pushing Tony away in the process. He freed himself from his clothing quickly, and pulled himself up over Tony, resting his bare chest on the mechanically equipped one below him. He pushed past Tony's lips with his wet tongue, his hot breath flooding Tony's senses. Loki's hands ran down Tony's bare skin greedily, pressing down into bone and muscle. He felt Tony push him back gently. "I'm not finished," Tony said, pushing up at his chest again. "On your back," he commanded. Loki flopped into the bed beside him with a haughty glance of resignation. He knew if he argued Tony would only go slower. He needed Tony *now*. Tony's wet fingers traced along his chest again, teasing him each time they sank lower down his abdomen, just short of the spot they were so desperately wanted. "You're beautiful," Tony said simply.

"Stark," Loki said, leaning up from the bed, "there is no need to be---"

"Really," Tony said, "and you can take a complement when I give you one." His eyes caught sight of the errant curl again, the stubborn pride that reigned upon Loki's face, the slender dance of alabaster curves and edges that were flushed in all the places Tony had touched him. Loki rolled his eyes and said nothing. He laid back down. "What was that you said earlier," Tony said, finally touching his cock, making him shudder. "You'll be mine?" Loki gasped as Tony's thumb circled the head.

"Yes," Loki moaned.

"Good," Tony said into his ear again, stroking him. Loki was already on the verge, and he could not hold out for much longer. His eyes had closed tight. His neck had arched back, pressing his head into the pillow as his mouth spread open. Tony was watching with lustful delight.

"If you persist," Loki shuddered, unable to stop himself from thrusting up into Tony's able hand, "I won't hold out much further."

"That's the plan," Tony said, leaning over and kissing his shoulder. He sucked hard at the skin. The moan of longing that rattled the chest beside him was exquisite. Loki thrust up in his hand again, beyond the reach of willpower. His mind was gone, lost in the throes of desire.

"You're mesmerizing," Tony whispered in his ear. A throaty, soft chuckle rumbled quietly in Tony's chest. "We've both been accused of not having a heart, but we know that's not really true," Tony said softly into the curve of his ear. Loki's hands gripped at the bed as he leaned towards Tony, his spine tingling with each whispered word. "You especially," Tony said, smiling warmly. He stroked harder, listening to Loki gasp for air. He kissed the god's shoulder again.

"Tony," he moaned, clawing his clenched hands into the bed sheets. The next moan that came was unrefined and feral as Tony felt hot cum between his fingers.

When he opened his eyes Tony was watching him, a smile tugging at the corner of his mouth. "Don't get ahead of yourself mortal," Loki said defensively, still catching his breath, closing his

eyes as his pulse began rescinding. He heard the bed sheets groan as Tony shifted on the bed beside him.

“You’re not fooling anyone,” Tony said, leaning down and stealing a kiss from him. He felt Loki’s hands wrap around his head and comb into his hair, keeping him there. Tony had won. Tony had won him completely. He continued to press his lips into any skin he could get at, sucking hard. “Certainly not me,” Tony said. “That’s why this’ll work. It’ll be messy,” he said softly, sighing as Loki’s hands slipped down into his boxers, cupping the curves of his ass, “but that’s how we are.”

“Stop,” Loki muttered, biting his skin, “talking.” He bit at Tony’s neck, picking up speed. His thumbs hooked into Tony’s boxers and tugged them off. He threw them over the side of the bed. The mattress sank down minutely as he braced one arm on the other side of the bed by Tony’s hips, staring down over at him. His disheveled black hair fell over his shoulders as he watched Tony, who would not stop smiling at him. He was looking up at Loki’s chest, trailing his eyes along all of the flushes of pink that he had left.

Loki blinked slowly, and Tony could see his chest rise and fall in shortened breaths before he bent down and took the head of Tony’s cock in his mouth. The ache burning through his erection grew more than he could’ve imagined possible in that moment. That clever tongue was strategically tracing the vein of his shaft, and Tony was giving in, combing his hands through Loki’s hair and closing his eyes, parting his legs. Tony’s moans and loud breathing filled the room. One of Loki’s hands had taken hold of the coarse hair above Tony’s cock, letting Loki set the pace. He could feel Tony’s pulse in his mouth as he took him in deep and Tony’s hips jerked up against him. His throat clenched in a moan as he felt Tony’s cock inside of him. In the sensitive space before Tony’s ass, his free hand pressed his thumb achingly in, massaging the tight space before wandering back to Tony’s balls and teasing him with gentle rolls. He closed his eyes, thinking of nothing but the throb aching in his throat and Tony’s shameless moans. The man was pulling desperately at his hair now, and every cell in Loki’s body pulsated with reception. He was only aware of how badly Tony wanted him, how needed he was. Tony’s scent, the sweat from him, the urgent thrust of his cock, it all sang of want. And Loki wanted. Tony groaned beneath him then, and his hips bucked up once before Loki felt the hot liquid spill into his mouth.

Slowly, he pulled away, a hot trail of saliva dripping down from his lips. He swallowed.

Tony laid spent on the bed, shaking. His eyes were closed. Loki lowered himself down beside Tony and kissed at his neck softly, smiling. Tony’s arm wrapped down over his back. Loki drummed his fingers gently against Tony’s arc reactor.

“I think we can make this work,” Tony gasped.

“That we can,” Loki muttered into Tony’s chest.

They laid together in silence for a long time before either said anything. Partially because they were coming down from their own highs, and partially because they were both realizing that this was the first time that they had made love together without any pretenses. Loki was busy trying to deny to himself that he was agonizingly happy, and that all the months of his plotting and yearning had, for the first time, brought him joy. The thought that the road ahead of him might at last hold a light created an exhaustion too deep for his defenses to derail. All that was left for him was to press in close to Tony, and surrender to the possibility. He had buried his face into Tony’s shoulder, unable to move and unwilling to show his face.

Tony was excited. And curious. There was a future ahead of him far different than anything he had ever planned for, and he was looking forward to discovering it. Once he had set aside his fears about leaving what he knew and realized what was possible, a peace had overtaken him. That was

when he had known that he could be with Loki. He stroked Loki's hair, wondering if the god had fallen asleep.

"Babe," Tony whispered. Loki's head turned to the side, away from him, still resting on his chest. "We have a lot to talk about," he said softly.

"Tomorrow," Loki said.

"Tomorrow I tell everyone," Tony said. "I don't know how they'll handle my leaving."

Loki lifted his head to search Tony's eyes. Tony was only grinning sleepily back at him. "We can figure it out in the morning. I'm thinking a summer house in Asgard, holidays in New York, maybe a condo on Orion's Belt."

Loki lowered his head back down. "No summer house in Asgard," he said.

"Another realm then," Tony said. "With a lab for me and a library for you---" he let his words trail off into silence. Tony brushed his hands through Loki's hair again. He could feel that the god was overcome, but he didn't push the issue. It was enough that he was there, breathing softly against his chest, quiet.

His fingers slipped along the smooth hair rhythmically as he listened to that gentle breathing.

"In the morning," Tony said, bending down to kiss his head.

That Morning Between Us

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Tony woke up first. He stretched his legs, wondering how he had managed to wake up before Loki. There were no windows in the room, but Tony could tell from the light shining beneath Loki's bedroom door that the sun was up. He glanced over at the pillow beside him. Loki's face was turned away from him, and he could see nothing but his bare back rising and falling slowly. Tony sat up in the bed and stretched his arms, savoring what he assumed would be the only peaceful moment that day.

On second thought, maybe he could drag it out a little further, like sucking on a piece of hard candy until it disappeared. He decided to make breakfast for the two of them.

Not that it was his forte, but he could try. Quietly, Tony slipped out of the bed and padded softly towards the door, glancing over his shoulder with a warm grin as he saw Loki's sleeping face. Presently, his lips twitched up into a smile, and Tony wondered what Loki was dreaming about.

He snatched a pair of clean gray boxers from the dresser before heading out into the main room. With disappointment, Tony realized that Loki had only ever tolerated the tiny counter and sink in the corner from the room's original layout. There wasn't much of a kitchen to work with. Kneeling down, he popped open the counter cabinet and glanced inside. He found an unopened box of cereal and a bag of gummy candy. They had probably been left there from months ago. There were plates and bowls, but upon taking them out, Tony found that there was a thin layer of dust on them.

The plates clattered as he dropped them into the sink, turning the faucet on. As the water ran he found a stack of cups, and some silverware. It was only then that Tony realized he didn't even have any soap to begin washing the dishes.

With disappointment he stood back up, glaring dismissively at the mess of plates and utensils in the sink. He could sneak into the tower kitchen and try to make breakfast, but he'd probably run into someone. The faucet squeaked loudly as Tony turned it off.

"If you are hungry, I can bring something in," a sleepy voice yawned behind him. Tony turned around to see Loki shuffling towards him, rubbing at his eyes. There was an elegance to the way he stretched his tired limbs, but it was evident that he was a long way from waking up completely.

"I was going to make breakfast, but babe, what exactly do you eat? Air?" Tony asked. Loki stopped in the middle of rubbing his eye to stare deadpan at him.

"I have no need to cook," Loki explained, sinking down into the couch and laying out his legs across the cushions. He had not bothered to dress. "I can summon whatever I want here."

Tony took a seat in the armchair across from him. "That's great. I'm a terrible cook," Tony admitted playfully.

"I know," Loki said, smiling. He had draped an arm across his face to block out the sun.

"Hey," Tony said with reprimand. "I try. We can't all be Harry Potter." He saw Loki's lips twitch. "You can ask Bruce to explain that reference," he said with a smile.

Loki lowered his arm just enough so that his dark green eyes could stare at Tony with interest.

Then a languid grin took hold of him. “What is that place you are so fond of?” Before Tony could answer Loki snapped his fingers. A tray of doughnuts, steaming coffee, creamers, beignets, and sweet rolls appeared on the coffee table beside them.

Tony blinked a moment before smiling. He recognized that the doughnuts were from a chain restaurant down the road that he frequented. The beignets and sweet rolls were from a bakery a little further that Loki favored. “I don’t feel so bad about not making you breakfast now,” Tony said.

Loki covered his eyes with his arm again, grinning. With contentment he listened to Tony stirring creamer into his coffee on the table, the clink of the metal against the cup, Tony sighing after he took his first sip. “Don’t you want anything?” Tony asked, already knowing the answer.

“In a while,” Loki said, still struggling to wake up.

Comfortably, he listened to Tony eat breakfast and chatter to himself intermittently about how good something was. The sound of his voice only lulled Loki further back into the arms of sleep, until, by the end of Tony’s breakfast, he was asleep again.

With satisfaction, Tony grabbed another doughnut, content to drink a second cup of coffee and watch Loki sleep on the couch in the morning sun.

Chapter End Notes

Just a fluffy interlude more so because I wanted to write some fluff in my life this week than that the story needs it. The next chapter will be decidedly not fluffy, so enjoy it while it lasts. That team confrontation is coming soon. ;)

That Which Was Inevitable

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Tony was fully dressed when Loki woke up. At first, as Loki's eyes opened from sleep, he recognized Tony's styled brown hair as it caught glints of the midmorning light. He glanced down and saw Tony staring up at him from where the man had crouched down beside the couch. Tony was wearing a navy cotton t-shirt and jeans, but there was something subtly polished about his otherwise casual appearance. Loki closed his eyes again and felt Tony kiss his forehead. "Time to get up," Tony said.

"Stark," Loki hissed, rolling over on the soft couch.

"Get up," Tony said with more command.

"Return to your breakfast or so help me by the nine I will---"

"It's well past breakfast," Tony said, "and I believe," he said, rubbing his hand along Loki's tense bare shoulder, "that someone here said something about wanting to see me choose him."

He saw Loki's head lift up from the couch. The god turned over his shoulder to look at Tony. "I already have," he said. Then he blinked sleepily, smirking mischievously. "Though I wouldn't mind experiencing it again."

"Come on," Tony said, patting his back once. "Get up. We've got things to talk about."

Loki pulled himself up into a seated position. "Fine," he said. Glancing down, he saw that the coffee had gone cold long ago. Tony must've slipped out to shower while he was sleeping. Quietly, Loki got up from the couch and walked away to shower. Tony took out his tablet and began reading his usual websites, knowing that it would take Loki a good hour to get ready.

It didn't surprise Tony when he saw Loki walking towards him in grand Asgardian garb a good while later. The fabric draped behind him flared out in his gait, flashes of emerald waving in the movement. He sat down across from Tony and spread out his limbs, not making eye contact. Tony set his tablet down.

"It'll be fine," Tony said. "Just let me talk to them."

Loki glanced over at him, aggression kindling beneath his tranquil composure. "I hardly see why we should entertain them any further."

"Loki," Tony said. "I'm kinda putting them in a tough spot. They depend on me. This whole Avengers thing? It's sorta a big deal here. Not to brag, but there are people with my face tattooed on their arms." Loki rolled his eyes as slowly and dramatically as physically possible. "So," Tony said, ignoring him, "they might still need me sometimes."

Tony's crumpled Iron Man suit flickered through Loki's mind. He rubbed his kneecap with one hand, thinking. "What would that entail?"

Tony frowned. "I might need you to pop me back on over here if something big is going down." Tony shrugged uncomfortably, flexing his shoulders. "This is home," he said softly, "I want to protect it." With trepidation Loki looked towards him. He felt guilt when he saw the emotion in

Tony's eyes.

"Alright," Loki said. Whether it was because of that guilt or not, he did not know.

"Not all the time. Just if they need me," Tony said. "I'm still Iron Man."

"I know," Loki said, ready for the conversation to move along.

Tony sighed, sitting back in his chair. "Loki, we've never talked about where it is that you want to go."

"Everywhere," Loki said, his head resting in his propped up hand. "It is limitless, Stark."

"Okay, well," Tony said, taking in a long breath, "can you be a little more specific than that? Like am I gonna need the travel sized soap or economy size because---"

"Tony," Loki said. "You needn't concern yourself with the details. We may return to Midgard as you require, but I have no want to maintain this sedentary lifestyle infinitely. Can you not be contented to travel?"

"But all the time?" Tony asked.

"Of course not," Loki replied. "We may remain anywhere as long as we wish." He rose from where he was seated. In a few steps he loomed over Tony, leaning in close to the mortal's ear. "Whatever we desire," he muttered languidly, "will be our map," he finished, popping the last word definitively. He could hear Tony's breath hitch in his throat.

"Yeah, but how do I pack for that?" Tony recovered. "Will there be wifi?"

Loki leaned away from him with disgust, standing upright again. Tony smiled broadly, utterly pleased with himself. He was not about to allow Loki to seduce his way out of the conversation.

"Better than," Loki replied, sitting back down.

"That's hard to believe," Tony said dismissively, thinking of the high-speed connection in the tower. "So when would we leave?" Tony asked.

"Now, tomorrow, a month from now," Loki suggested. "I simply mean we will not be bound to this place."

"But we'll return," Tony said. "We'll both return, right?"

Loki's eyelids blinked in rapid succession. "Yes," he said.

"Because this tower is kinda my pet project," Tony said. "I watched it grow from a run down drugstore to the beauty you see now," he boasted. Loki said nothing, privately believing that Tony would not be nearly so impressed with it as his understanding of the universe expanded.

"Perhaps we should get the team meeting over with," Loki suggested.

"Yeah," Tony said. He brushed his hand across his rough facial hair anxiously. "Just let me handle it, okay?" Loki was turned from him, feigning compliance as he stared at the pile of dishes in his unused sink with empty curiosity. "Loki?" Tony asked.

"Yes," Loki answered.

“Let me do the talking.” The god still would not look at him. Tony reached out and put his hand on Loki’s knee. “I mean it,” Tony said.

“I’m certain that you do,” Loki said.

“Babe,” Tony reprimanded him, knowing that Loki detested pet names. “Keep that silver tongue of yours in your mouth.”

“I would prefer it in other places,” Loki replied.

“So would I,” Tony said back. “But not at the meeting. After.”

“Mhmm,” Loki said. Tony crossed his arms, knowing that look all too well. He would have to be sure to speak first. Tony had no idea what Loki would say if given the floor, but he doubted that it would do them any favors. Tony knew them, and he knew what they needed to hear. Loki would just have to trust him.

“Let’s go to the common room,” Tony said, walking over to the elevator. Loki followed him, not because he couldn’t transport himself, but because he wanted a few quiet moments with the man. He would never admit that aloud though, of course. Loki watched the buttons light up systematically as they headed towards the common room floor, listening to the man breathing beside him. Tony was tense and focused. Loki leaned back against the wall comfortably, already imagining how it would go. The elevator came to a halt. “Hey,” Tony said, surprising him from his thoughts. He leaned up and kissed Loki on the lips reassuringly. The sudden tenderness confused Loki, but it gave way quickly as he recognized Tony’s favorite cologne. The man pulled away from him before he could chase the longing any further. “Remember what we said about your tongue,” Tony said over his shoulder, walking away and into the common room.

“Jarvis,” Tony said, taking a seat in one of the white armchairs. “Call the team down for a meeting.”

Clint knew the moment that he stepped into the room. Tony and Loki were seated beside one another. That was all that he had to know.

He had suspected that this was the result. Natasha had said as much a few days ago. No one had told her, but she was adept enough at reading people to figure it out. Pepper seemed like a weight had been lifted off her shoulders, but a sadness still lingered around her. Tony had been expectedly absent, and Bruce had seemed to know something. Natasha felt fairly certain that she’d worked things out. Of course though, Pepper’s absence in the room now also made it no secret.

Clint took the chair directly in front of Tony, slamming his weight down into it. He crossed his arms and glared, unmoving. Under other circumstances, it might’ve been comical. As it was, it only made Tony more tense and apprehensive.

Bruce had already come in, but he had chosen a chair further to the side, anticipating the eventual blowout. Steve and Natasha were arriving presently. “Alright,” Tony said, before they had a chance to sit down. “Here’s the situation. And before you say anything, let me finish.”

He stood up from the chair. He was too anxious to sit. Then, feeling that was too awkward, he sat back down on the arm of the chair, crossing his arms uncomfortably and slouching his back. “I know that you’re all concerned,” he said tersely, feeling a little like he was in front of the press,

“and I get that. I do.” Tony closed his eyes and took in a breath before looking at them again. Each of them focused their eyes keenly on him. “I’m not exactly known for my good decisions,” he said, taking in another deep breath. Clint’s eyes flickered over to Loki, who glared in return. “But this is the right one.”

“I’m leaving,” Tony said. Everyone started talking at once. “I’m not finished,” Tony said loudly. “I’m still Iron Man. I’ll be back as needed. I just won’t be here full time. And another thing? Meddling with my relationships? Super not cool.”

“Tony,” Steve said, taking the lead the moment that it became clear that Tony was finished. “You can’t leave the team. We need you. Where are you going?”

“Leave the team? He’s committed treason!” Clint shot back. “Am I the only one that remembers what happened? Loki led an invasion that killed hundreds of people!”

“We all remember New York,” Bruce said loudly from the corner of the room. “Stop acting like you’re the only one.”

“The only one that cares, apparently,” Clint muttered.

“Maybe you should step out for a moment,” Tony said quietly towards Loki.

“I’ll stay,” he replied darkly.

“Where are you going?” Steve repeated.

“We’re just going to travel here and there,” Tony said, trying to downplay it.

“No,” Steve said. “You have responsibilities here. Who’s going to be our tech guy? Who’s going to be Iron Man?”

Tony found it quaintly cute that Steve was using the term “tech guy,” but he refrained from saying anything. “I still am,” Tony said. “Listen. We don’t get calls out into the field everyday. Most of the time I’m just working in my lab anyway. You won’t even know that I’m gone.”

“That’s not true,” Steve said.

“Let him go,” Clint said irritably.

“Stop. We’re arguing about different things,” Natasha said. “One. Tony’s allowed to come and go in the team as he pleases. We’re not holding anyone here against their will. Two,” she said, glancing over at Loki. “Do we trust Tony with Loki?”

“I actually wanted to go back and argue the whole treason thing,” Tony said glibly.

“Trust him?” Clint said. “Are you insane?”

“You trust me and I manufactured weapons that killed hundreds,” Tony said, painfully serious. “And stop me if I’m wrong, but aren’t you an assassin?”

Clint quieted for a moment before coming back at Tony, whose eyes were ablaze. “Excuse me for taking issue with you dating the guy that still haunts my fuckin’ nightmares,” he said through gritted teeth. Clint refused to look towards Loki, ashamed to admit how the experience had scarred him. Tony had gone silent. It was the first time that he’d actually caught a glimpse of what was going on with Clint. He’d been too wrapped up in his own problems to see anything past Clint’s

anger. “So yeah,” Clint said, filling the silence, “if you want me to be okay with it, forget it.” Subtly, Natasha reached over and patted his leg.

Tony turned back to glance at Loki. Now would be an excellent time for him to chime in. The god saw Tony, still sitting on the arm of the chair with his arms crossed, turning with hesitation, but Loki couldn’t look at Tony then.

Steve was lost in thought. No one was speaking. The silence killed Clint. It made him feel judged, or weaker. They didn’t understand. Clint had blood on his hands from the SHIELD agents that he’d killed under Loki’s command, and the thoughts haunted him. No matter how many times Natasha told him not to do that to himself, that magic was something they just weren’t trained for, Clint still blamed himself. He also blamed Loki, but above all else he blamed himself for not being strong enough to stop it from happening. Hadn’t he seen when Thor arrived on Earth? He should’ve known better. He should’ve known what was out there and prepared for it. Maybe then he wouldn’t have lost his coworkers to his own inadequacy.

Loki’s doppelganger flooded Clint’s nightmares, turning Clint into the weapon that took down each of them, slowly, painfully, in revoltingly torturous ways. Tony was often the centerpiece of those dreams, and when he died he accused Clint of murdering him again and again. To be seated now, only a few feet from Loki...Clint’s only outlet was his outrage.

“No,” Clint said. “Tony, you’re out of your mind. If you hadn’t destroyed that machine downstairs, I would’ve put him in it by now.”

“That wasn’t me,” Tony said, seizing on the chance to talk about something else. He had no idea what to say to reassure Clint. He didn’t think that there was anything that could.

Clint turned to look at Natasha, who shook her head.

“You then,” Clint said to Loki.

“I did,” Bruce said. He felt the attention of the room crash over him like a wave. “I didn’t think it was fair for us to take the decision out of Tony’s hands.” Bruce smiled nervously, glancing down at the floor. “I don’t think Tony’s out of his mind.”

Tony’s head tilted back, exposing his neck as he drew in a long breath. He was overcome by Bruce’s loyalty to him, dumbstruck that they’d been considering imprisoning Loki with the machine that seriously, annoyed by it all, and anxious about Loki, who had stuck to his silence promise far too well for it to be a good thing.

“Great,” Clint said. He wouldn’t say outright that the machine had been their only insurance against Loki, but his tone more than implied it.

“Hey,” Bruce said. “I’m not against you Clint. I’m just not against Tony either.”

“I’m not against Tony,” Clint said. “I think he’s being an idiot,” he said forcefully, “but I’m not against him.”

“Then it’s Tony’s decision,” Steve said somberly. “I think this has gone on long enough.”

“Super,” Tony said heavily.

“Tony,” Clint said, his voice climbing, “don’t do this, man. Can’t you have anyone else? Why does it have to be him? You could choose anyone in the world but *him*.”

“Clint, that’s not up to you,” Tony said quietly. “I think this meeting is over. I made the decision that you’ve all pushed me along with. I have done my fucking best to meet you half way on this. Take it,” Tony said, shrugging his shoulders from below defiant, angry eyes.

“It’ll be fine,” Natasha said softly towards Clint, sitting rigidly in her chair.

“No it won’t,” Clint said.

Suddenly, the air of the room changed. The conversations took off, each person trying to get a word in edge wise. None would yield to the other. Their voices rose and lapped over each other in a frantic merry-go-round, building into a directionless frenzy. Only Loki remained silent.

“There’s nothing left to argue about---”

“If we got called into the field right now---”

“I’m fucking sick of this---”

“Why don’t we just call it a day---”

“You don’t have a monopoly on feeling that way---”

“Yeah? I’m angry too---”

“Why do you have to keep bringing that up---”

“You know it’s not the same thing---”

“This isn’t helping anyone---”

“Try telling me that in twenty years---”

“You’re a bunch of selfish school children---”

“That’s a lie and you know it---”

“ENOUGH!”

The voice rattled them, bursting the chaos in the room like a frail soap bubble. Each head turned slowly until they were all facing the lone figure in the back of the room. Thor stood there, facing them with his arms crossed, his face set in a rigid mask of brutal focus that they were familiar with only on the battle field. His skin was tanner than before, and a long gold braid hung over his shoulder above his Asgardian armor. The crimson cape unfurled behind him as he walked towards the cluster of white chairs.

“How much did you hear?” Loki asked, breaking his silence.

“Enough,” Thor answered. “Tony,” he said. “Come with me.”

“Yeah,” Tony said grimacing, “I don’t know about---”

“Fear not,” Thor said, raising up his hand. “I will speak with you first, and then,” he said, locking in on Loki, “we shall speak.”

Loki sank back into the chair, his skin visibly paler than before. He acted apathetic, but it was little more than a lie. His fingers clenched down into the arms of the chair. Otherwise, he did not move.

He saw Tony get up and walk towards Thor, making some wisecrack and receiving a light, if not generous, laugh from Thor. The Asgardian's arm wrapped around Tony's shoulders as they left the room, and though Loki recognized that it was only friendly, he could not stop a fit of possessive jealousy from crying out within him. The sound of the room had hallowed out, and though he was vaguely aware of the hushed whisperings around him and cautious glances his way, he said nothing. In his shock he had failed to see the spark of hope in Thor's eyes as he had looked at his brother.

Chapter End Notes

ah, I love Clint but you'd never know it

the next chapter is mostly finished, after proofing it should be up in 48 hours

That I Wanted to Tell You

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“You’re smiling,” Tony said. “And no offense, but you’re kinda freakin’ me out.”

“My apologies,” Thor said. “It is just for the first time in a long time I am truly happy for him.” Thor had a stupid, impossibly persistent grin on his face that he could not shake, no matter how many times he tried to compose himself. “Tony Stark, if I had known that this entire situation was from my brother’s love for you, the worry that would have saved me.”

“Sorry?” Tony said, confused. He’d thought that at the very least Thor would be disappointed that Loki had not come to fix things between them.

“This is---” Thor glanced around the halted elevator. “You have no concept of how incredible this is. That he should feel so strongly for anyone, truly, Tony, you are a remarkable man.”

Tony found himself staring at his shoes, wondering if his face was actually burning red or not. He wasn’t sure why that compliment was getting to him, but it was.

“So often I have feared him lost. There were times when I thought I saw---“ Thor was lost in fields of thoughts again. “Who he was before now. The boy that I played with as a child. And he asked these questions, that make such sense now, though I ignored them at the time.”

“Like what?” Tony asked, feeling slightly panicky.

“About mortals,” Thor said, gliding right along. “And you intend to stay with him?”

“Yes,” Tony said.

“And travel through the realms?”

“Yes.”

Thor laughed, deep and heartily. “Oh the adventures you will have. I am almost jealous.”

Tony grinned, nodding. It was like he’d stepped in a room with the sun after being trapped in the rain just moments before.

“I would like you to meet my family,” Thor said. “I know Loki will not consent to returning to Asgard right now, but I wish for my family to meet you as my friend. I would like them to know the man that won the heart of my brother.”

“You’re taking this well,” Tony said. In truth, the sudden shift in mood had left his head spinning a bit.

Thor’s relentless smile was back. “Of course,” he said. “My brother and one of my closest comrades---I am greatly pleased.” He had seen nearly all of the team’s argument when he’d reappeared in Midgard. Thor had just chosen to keep quiet long enough to hear what was happening. He knew that the room had been tense, and he was furious with his teammates. But he was thrilled with Tony, and he had to let the man know that first. He’d also wanted to verify for himself, to make sure that he truly understood what was going on. If he’d misunderstood, if Loki

weren't really in love with Tony, then Thor wasn't sure that he could handle the crush of disappointment. He had to be sure first.

"Tony," Thor said. "You have given your heart to my brother? Even though it has been said that he is, as is your Midgardian phrase, crazy as balls?"

Tony laughed. The sound cracked out of him like it was splitting his ribs. "I don't know who taught you that," Tony gasped, wiping away a tear. It was such a relief to laugh again. "But yes. Yes I have."

"Thank you," Thor said.

"For what?" Tony asked, glancing up at the beaming Asgardian.

"For seeing him," Thor said. "I love him and I---" he was grinning again. "I am glad that another can see what I have. More even." He pushed his braid back over his shoulder. "I often worried of your people's forgiveness. I have felt such guilt at what hardship my failures with my brother have brought to your planet. Clint does not surprise me," Thor said quietly. "Though I cannot allow that to persist. Loki is my brother, and of Asgard, and now," he said, grinning again, "one of my comrade's dearest people."

"Thanks for not freaking out," Tony said.

Thor laughed. "When this is settled, we will drink our way through every bar in Manhattan. This is to be celebrated." He glanced towards the door, knowing that he had promised to speak to Loki next. He paused first, before pressing the open button. "Truly Tony," he said. "We are blessed to know you."

Tony just grinned his thanks. His brain had short-circuited out of retorts, too overwhelmed to do much other than process. When he followed Thor back into the room he felt a thousand times lighter, though little had changed in the atmosphere there.

Chapter End Notes

as always, thank you so much for reading and your comments <3

Now That We All Know

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Loki couldn't make eye contact with Tony as the man entered the room. It was obvious that Tony was happy, giddy even, and that only made it worse. The last thing that he wanted to see was the happiness he couldn't have.

Stiffly, he crossed the room to the waiting elevator, where Thor was leaning against the automatic doors. He heard Tony's voice burst through the room behind him, filling it with animated chatter as he often did when he was nervous, or in a good mood. As the doors closed behind them Loki heard Steve's voice distinctly answering, with similar good nature.

Thor was smiling in a warm, pleasurable grin that tugged at the corner of his mouth. He was only halfheartedly trying to contain it at this point. His younger brother had slumped against the closed doors, rigidly ignoring his older brother. Thor could see Loki's mind at work, the spring coiling as it so often had in his eyes before something set ablaze. Thor was nothing but a warm, sturdy presence, standing comfortably with his crimson cape gently emblazoning his easy stance and amicably crossed arms.

"Loki," he said calmly. "I'm proud of you."

His little brother's head raised in its typically feral, defensive way. "If you see that as a means to earn my sympathy---"

"Loki," Thor said. "All is well."

"Forgive me if I find that difficult to believe," Loki said. Though his sharp eyes locked with his brother's, he denied to himself the kindness there, keeping his defenses up. "Are you not here to persuade me to abandon your comrade, because I assure you, I have no intention of doing so."

Thor relaxed, letting his hands drop to his sides. "It pleases me to hear that," Thor said. He looked away from Loki, casting his eyes down along the ground casually. His voice came across level and at ease. "You have grown in your time here. For that I am proud. Perhaps we are not so different after all."

Loki scoffed. His lips snarled up into a sneer, but he could never conceal the softness in his eyes. He was never as immune to sentiment as he pretended to be.

"You will take care of him," Thor said, glancing up from his downwardly titled head, a seriousness etched into his brow from behind the straight gold wisps of hair that brushed against his face.

"Of course," Loki replied incredulously.

"That is all I care to know," Thor said. Loki said nothing. He was no longer watching Thor, but he seemed to be waiting for something. Or lost in thought. Thor could not tell. "You must be eager to begin," Thor said quietly. He knew only too well the frantic agony of having one's heart tied to a short mortal life. For them, love would be gone in a season, and they were destined only to watch it turn, like autumn leaves falling to the ground. Loki nodded stiffly. He was not about to mourn it before his brother, but he could not deny it either. Vexingly, Thor was the only one that could understand.

Thor stepped forward, patting Loki's shoulder as he did. Loki yanked it from his older brother's grasp, preferring to stand just out of reach at the side of the small space. Thor turned his head to face Loki as he pressed the door button. He only grinned with confidence, reassuringly, before stepping out. Loki swallowed hard, disagreeably, irritably following after his brother's footsteps.

"Alright," Thor announced, standing broadly in front of the group. Loki slinked in behind and past him, slipping into the chair where Tony was still leaning on the arm. The playboy glanced down at him and grinned, that devil-may-care look back in his eyes. The older Asgardian's voice boomed out authoritatively towards them, capturing the room in its sway. "I have heard enough of your grievances."

"Loki is my brother and you will treat him with the same respect that you have shown me. He has proven his worthiness in the past few months." Thor took his time looking in each of their faces, making certain that they understood. He only met resistance with Clint. "I understand your grievances, but I also understand that you are my friends. I ask you this not only as your ally, but as your friend."

Each sat quietly then, taking in their own thoughts. Thor's sudden appearance, followed by his abrupt assumption of power in the room had quieted things. Tony glanced over at Loki, grinning hesitantly in an unspoken question. The god said nothing, but he reached up and faintly brushed the backs of his fingers against Tony's waist. Tony turned away then, wondering what had been said between the two in the elevator.

"Whatever you need you've got," Steve said. "You know that."

"Then perhaps it is time we release Loki from the rules we set when he came here," said Thor.

The team turned to look at each other silently. Clint had given up arguing now, and was only fuming silently.

"That seems fair," Bruce said. There were shrugs of agreement around him.

"Then it is decided," Thor said. He couldn't help but look over to Loki then, to see his little brother struggling between two conflicting emotions. "It pleases me to see my team and my brother in agreement." He relaxed then, returning to his usual timbre.

"So Thor, why don't you tell us about your trip," Steve said, rising out of his chair. "I think we could all use a drink," he said, gesturing towards the elevator.

"That sounds wonderful," Natasha agreed, standing up.

"I think there are still some wine coolers in the fridge," said Bruce. Natasha gave him a look that said wine coolers were hardly appropriate.

The team crowded into the elevator then, saying nothing when Loki and Tony stayed behind. They knew better. Tony watched his friends disappear behind the sliding doors, all clustered together and animated as they spoke to one another. Steve was laughing as the doors shut, his laughter cutting out the instant the elevator closed.

Tony slid off the arm of the couch and stood up, stretching. He turned around. Loki glanced up tensely at him from the armchair, his lips in a tight, thin line.

"What'd he say?" Tony asked, diving right in.

Loki turned his head away in profile. Tony found himself admiring the god's eyelashes then,

despite how somber he was. “That he approves is all.”

“Well that’s great, isn’t it?” Tony asked, being careful not to say it too eagerly.

“It’s convenient,” Loki said.

So that’s how he was going to play it. Tony wasn’t an idiot. He knew Loki was feeling something from his brother’s support, and too stubborn to accept it. “Hey,” Tony said. “Things are smoothed out now. As much as they’ll ever be.”

Loki grinned then. “Don’t be so sure of that,” he said. “Fate is never finished with me.”

“Great,” Tony said, leaning forward to kiss his forehead. “Neither am I.”

“Stark, if you insist upon being so cloying I may get sick,” Loki said.

“Oh?” Said Tony, taking a few steps back. “Then I suppose I can go elsewhere. They’re drinking upstairs, and I could really go for some shots right now.” He turned to leave, slowly stepping away.

Loki reached forward and yanked the back of his shirt, knocking Tony off balance. He pulled the man into him possessively, sinking his lips into the sensitive skin on the back of Tony’s neck, grazing his teeth and making Tony’s spine arch. “Not an option,” Loki muttered. He closed his eyes then, holding Tony still. The man relaxed into his chest, his eyes still wide and alert, waiting to see what Loki would do next.

“That’s what I thought,” Tony said.

Chapter End Notes

I wasn't sure about this chapter, so let me know how it reads. They finally have a run of a few chapters where everything's going well for them, don't they?

That Hour Past Midnight

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Night had fallen hours ago. It was quiet in the tower now. The team had departed to their own floors much earlier, after a lengthy catch up session with Thor. Tony and Loki had attended, arriving a little later, mostly at Tony's insistence. It had been good for both of them.

The hallways along the tower were dark and unlit, except for a few small guide lights along the sleek corridors. Outside, the glow of city lights was bright, contrasting the dark and open sky.

There was a soft, steady patter along the empty hallways. Bruce was awake, pacing. He'd been unable to sleep, but not because of the events that day. It was his frequent worries that had awoken him. He was used to it. He'd pace for a while and then return back to bed.

Below him, Tony was waking up in Loki's bed. He rubbed his eyes, dropping his legs over the side of the bed. Stretching, he stood up. Tony walked out through the open bedroom door, brushing the sleep from his eyes. He looked across the room to the unused sink, with a pile of dusty dishes still sitting it. He'd have to go up to the kitchen to get a glass of water.

He arrived upstairs quickly. As he flipped on the kitchen lights he squinted, covering his eyes. It took him a minute to adjust to the fluorescent glare. Sleepily he grabbed a glass from the cabinet, flexing his neck as he did. The water sloshed into the glass from the purifier pitcher in his hand. He left, carrying the filled glass, dripping some water onto the floor in his wake, and walked out to the hallway to stretch his legs. From the corner of his eye he saw a silhouette.

He let out a sigh of relief when he recognized that it was Bruce, staring out the windows. "Hey," Tony said, walking up beside him. He took a drink from the glass, looking out onto the glow of buildings below them.

"Hello," Bruce said.

Together they stood in easy silence, watching the streets outside. A lone car would pass by occasionally, but otherwise, the city slept on.

"I thought of something that might pacify Clint," Bruce said. Tony took a long sip from the glass in his hand. He hadn't been thinking about much of anything since waking up.

"Yeah?" Tony said.

"There's a potted plant on Loki's coffee table," Bruce explained. "Loki pulled an arrow from one of the leaves, once."

Tony tilted his head, vaguely amused. He'd never paid that much attention to the things in Loki's room.

"Not that it'll solve everything," Bruce said, sighing. "But I think that maybe as a little peace offering, it'd give Clint something solid to look at." Bruce turned his head to look at Tony, who was still watching the city outside. "He needs a little more time to forgive than everyone else. He's upset with himself, not you."

"So, what," Tony said, softly squeezing the glass in his hand. "I should just have Loki write 'my

bad' on a slip of paper with a bouquet of arrows?"

"Couldn't hurt," Bruce said, smiling.

Tony grinned back, shaking his head. "Alright," Tony said, taking another drink. "I'll mention something to Loki. If it'll shut Clint up."

"You uh, you look better," Bruce said.

Tony glanced over at him, his rich brown eyes scanning his friend for further explanation.

"You're happier," Bruce said.

Tony nodded. He tilted the glass in his hands, watching the water circle the clear glass. "I feel happier," he said. "Hopeful."

Bruce smiled then, not unlike Thor had. "God that makes me happy to hear," he said.

"So why're you burning the midnight oil?" Tony asked, shifting his focus onto his friend.

"Oh, the usual," Bruce said quietly.

Tony nodded, familiar with Bruce's intermittent insomnia. "I'm going find you someone," Tony said lightly.

"No thanks," Bruce said, laughing faintly. "I don't need any more stress in my life."

"Ah come on," Tony said. "You never know. I might just run into a woman out there in the universe that turns into her own green rage monster. Or maybe another color. How attached are you to green?"

"Not very," Bruce said, rolling his eyes in a laugh.

"I'll see what I can do," Tony said. He took another drink, finishing off the glass. "Hey," he said, turning it over in his hands, "thanks. For, ya know, being there all the time."

"Don't mention it," Bruce said. "But remember what I told you. I'm not that kinda doctor. So don't sue me for malpractice or something," he said light heartedly.

"Eh, the lawyer fees would ruin the fun anyway," Tony said.

"Great," Bruce said, laughing it off.

Comfortable silence returned to them.

"I'm going to head back up," Tony said. "But keep an open mind about finding someone, okay? I'd rather your nights be sleepless for other reasons." He grinned.

"I'll put an ad in the missed connections page," Bruce replied, shaking his head. He'd only allow Tony to tease with him like this.

"Good," Tony said, turning to leave. Bruce watched him walk back down the hall before turning his attention back to the city. Ten minutes later he was back in his own bed, finding that sleep was not so far from his reach.

Tony crawled back into Loki's bed, enjoying the feeling of the soft sheets brushing past his skin.

His place in the bed had gone cold. He scooted over a little, fitting himself against the warm back beside him. He could feel Loki's chest rising and falling peacefully in sleep. Contented, Tony drifted off to sleep.

Chapter End Notes

surprise science bros chapter

The Side That I Never Saw

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Tony could hear Loki awake beside him even before he'd rolled over. "Morning," he said, grinning. He leaned to face Loki's back, resting his hand on Loki's bare shoulder. It was burning hot. "Babe," Tony said, sitting up straight in the bed and staring down at him.

Loki blinked up at him, his face contorted by sleep and disorientation. His hair was slick along the edges of his face where sweat had weighted it down. Tony set the back of his rough hand on Loki's cheek. "You're burning up," Tony said.

"Mhmm," Loki replied, closing his eyes again.

"Hey, can you get sick?" Tony said, beginning to panic. "Is that possible?" He kicked the covers off of his legs and slid off the bed, walking hurriedly over to the bedside. He'd need to get help.

"Yes," Loki said faintly. "Of course."

"What can I do?" Tony asked. "Do you need water? Do you need medicine?"

Loki's eyebrows furrowed, but he did not open his eyes. His mouth twitched, but he did not reply immediately. "Sleep," he said. He felt Tony's cold hand on his warm forehead. He sensed that the man was anxious, but the thought came and went as Loki lost himself in the comfort of that cold hand.

"Shit," Tony whispered. He grabbed the blankets from the bed and tucked them in around Loki swiftly. The god did not stir.

"Bruce," Tony said, knocking hurriedly on the doctor's door. "Jarvis, wake him up," Tony said.

"That's not necessary," Bruce said, opening the door. He'd been awake for hours, and from how he was dressed, it was easy to assume that he was already on his way to a volunteer clinic. "What's going on?"

"Loki's sick," Tony said. "Can you come look at him?"

"He can get sick?" Bruce asked, wavering somewhere between skepticism and curiosity.

"That's what I said," Tony replied. "He's burning up." Bruce sighed, nodding his head.

"Hold on just a second," he said. Walking into his room he grabbed a bag, draping his stethoscope around his shoulders as he returned to Tony's side. "I'll look at him, but you should probably go and get Thor. I don't have any experience with Asgardian medicine."

"I'll get him. You go ahead," Tony said, letting Bruce get off of the elevator first. His friend only hesitated for a second before walking into the room on Loki's floor alone. He always put his patients before anything else.

Bruce glanced around Loki's empty living room before walking towards the bedroom. He could smell sickness before he entered the room. The room was dark, but he could make out the god's

pale form hunched beneath the covers. Bruce hesitated before flipping the lights on.

Loki didn't flinch. He was too far asleep to notice or care. Bruce knelt down beside the bed, setting his bag on the floor. He took Loki's wrist in his hand. A warm, steady pulse greeted him. Gently, Bruce set Loki's arm back down on the bed. Tony had not been kidding. His skin was burning up. Taking an ear thermometer from his bag, Bruce pushed Loki's hair back from his face. He slipped the thermometer in. 58 Fahrenheit. Bruce shook the thermometer in disbelief. That was impossible. He tried again. 102.5 Fahrenheit.

Bruce was looking at the thermometer read out again when Tony came in, Thor in tow behind him. "Well, he has a fever," Bruce said, setting the thermometer back in his bag.

Bruce looked to Thor for some sort of explanation, but the god was silent. "I'd prefer if you woke him up," Bruce said to Tony, putting his stethoscope on.

"Hey," Tony said, sitting down on the bedside. "You've gotta wake up," he said, rubbing Loki's arm. The god's eyes flinched. "Come on, Bruce is here."

Loki's eyes opened then, seeking about the room. A mix of exasperation and embarrassment rippled across his features as he made out the forms of Banner and Thor by his bedside. "Can you try and sit up?" Tony said beside him.

Though it burdened his body to do so, Loki sat up quickly, just to prove that he could. "I need you to take a deep breath," Banner said, pressing a cold metal disk to his chest. He felt Tony's hand slip subtly under his. Thoughts of protesting Banner's unnecessary checkup slipped from his mind. Tony's concern was pleasant. "Take another deep breath," Banner was saying.

Velcro shrieked as Bruce wrapped a cuff around Loki's arm, taking his blood pressure. "Do you get colds on Asgard?" Bruce asked Thor.

"It's possible," Thor said.

"Well," Bruce said, taking off the cuff. "Hmm." His blood pressure was perfectly normal, as far as Bruce could tell. "How are you feeling?"

"Loki," Tony prompted after a moment. The god glared, as though the answer should've been obvious.

"Are you having any other symptoms besides a fever?" Bruce asked.

"No," Loki said. "I need only sleep."

"I'm going to diagnose this as a virus," Bruce said. "Have him take acetaminophen, drink lots of fluids, and rest. We'll see where it goes from there."

"So this is just a cold?" Tony asked. Loki was still sitting up in the bed, though it was apparent from his demeanor that it was uncomfortable to do so. Tony squeezed his hand.

"As far as I can tell. I mean, like I said, I don't know Asgardian medicine and Loki's body probably reacts to things differently than ours do," Bruce said.

"I'm fine," Loki muttered.

Bruce grabbed a bottle of acetaminophen from his bag and set it on the bedside table. "I'd rather you take those," he said. Then he looked over at Thor. "Unless you have any other suggestions."

Thor shook his head. "It is uncommon but not impossible for him to become ill," he said. A dark look crossed over to him from Loki. "I think your judgment is best," Thor said, turning his attention back over to Bruce to escape the threatening glare pointed at him.

"Well," Bruce said, picking up his bag. "I want everyone washing their hands at the very least. Especially you, Tony," he said, his voice rife with warning. "If it can make him sick, I can't even imagine what it'd do to you."

"Let it try," Tony said nonchalantly.

"I mean it," Bruce said. He glanced back over at the bedside table. "And make sure that he's taking that. His fever needs to go down. I'll check back down here in a few hours." He gave Tony one last warning glance before heading towards the door. Thor followed after him slowly, only after a long, cautious look at Loki.

"Please do as he says," Thor told them.

"Yeah, yeah," Loki muttered. Tony stifled a smile.

"Will do," he said, grinning reassuringly at Thor.

When they had gone Loki laid back down, but he continued to stare at Tony. There was a faint smile on the edge of his otherwise miserable lips. "You sure you're alright?" Tony asked.

"Mhmm," Loki said. Tony reached across him and grabbed the pill bottle. There was still some water in the glass he'd brought down from the night before. He popped open the cap and shook out a couple of pills.

"Take these," Tony said, picking up the glass of water.

Loki looked at the glass and back up at Tony. The man was so adamant. Relenting, Loki took the glass from him and let Tony press the pills into the palm of his hand. He swallowed them easily, but it was only after he'd set the glass down that Tony seemed to be relieved.

It was amusing, in a way. He knew it was a minor illness that would pass, and he had never known the fear of an untamable disease. This did not scare him. Though he was tired and hot and aching and miserable these were all things that he could handle. He was not a stranger to pain. Yet it all seemed so new and threatening to Tony. The man took his hand again, tenderly rubbing his palm. He was staring down at Loki's hand, marveling at the short, round fingernails protruding from long fingers. "I'm going to go get water for you from the kitchen," Tony said. "Do you want me to make you tea? Are you hungry?"

"No," Loki said honestly. He was faintly smiling again.

"Well, just in case," Tony said. He rose up off the bed. Loki could see him contemplating something a split second before Tony reached up and grabbed the covers, securely tucking them in around him. "Stay there until I get back," Tony said, somewhere between a joke and a command. Loki gently rolled his eyes, as if he'd any other option.

He stayed awake until Tony came back upstairs, carrying a tray with him. There was water, chamomile tea, several glasses of fluorescent colored liquid that smelt of sugar, and a bowl of soup sitting on a hot plate. Tony sat back down beside Loki. "I'll stay with you," he said.

That was when Bruce's words rang through Loki's mind. What if whatever it was did affect Tony? "No," Loki said with disappointment. "You'll get sick."

"I'm probably the one that gave it to you," Tony said stubbornly. He pushed Loki's wet hair back from his face again. "Besides, can you really argue with me right now?"

"Yes," Loki said, grinning. He felt Tony's hand on his forehead again.

"No you can't," Tony said.

Loki closed his eyes. Maybe he could let Tony win this time. "I was wondering," he heard Tony's voice say. "How you got this anyway. Can't you just poof it away like anything else?"

"Evidently not," Loki said. "A cold is not impossible for me. Rare, but not impossible."

"You have bad timing," Tony chided him gently.

"I do," Loki agreed. He could feel sleep beckoning him even as he tried to hang on and listen to Tony. The darkness was creeping in, wrapping its warm arms around him, whispering little lullabies into his ears.

"You'll just have to make up for it when you're feeling better," Tony said. Loki let sleep take him then, but only after he'd felt Tony brush his hair back behind his ear again.

Tony rose up from the bed and softly walked to the door, hitting the lights as he left. He glanced around the living room. He'd never paid much attention to the books there. Or, as he remembered the conversation from the previous night, the potted plant on Loki's coffee table.

Tony stooped down beside it. What had Bruce said? That one of the leaves had an arrow within it?

He really, really should not be doing this. Then again, who was Tony Stark to deny curiosity?

He grasped one of the thin leaves between his fingers and tugged. A slender rod came out from the plant then. Tony's eyebrows rose in interest, but he remained skeptical. He pulled the leaf away and found that there was indeed a sharp point at the end of the stem. Tony set it down on the table.

He wasn't sure why, but he felt a prick of apprehension in his spine. This couldn't be given to Clint. There was something off about it. He glanced over towards the open bedroom door and back down at the plant. Carefully, Tony picked up the arrow and slid it back into the plant. He felt slightly proud of himself for his self-restraint. His mind was buzzing with questions about the oddity, but he was willing to wait for Loki to explain it to him. The last thing the god needed right now was to save Tony from his own curiosity.

Tony turned his attention to the shelves. He began thumbing through the books then. To his disappointment, none of them were in English. They were all written in old runes, and the vast majority of them were musty and aged. One with a dark red spine caught his eye.

He flipped it open. A familiar face stared back at him, though it was far younger. Tony laughed. It was Loki as a child. He took the book back with him to the couch. There were photos of Thor, and two people that Tony assumed were his parents, as well as many other miscellaneous faces. Though he could not read it, the book seemed to be very formal. A vast majority of the photographs inside were clearly arranged and doctored to be perceived a certain way. It wasn't until Tony reached the end of the book that he found a picture tucked away between the pages and long forgotten.

It was Loki and Thor, playing together in a field of tall grass. They looked very young, probably around seven or eight. What would that have made them in human years? Thor's arm was draped protectively over his little brother, and even in the photograph Tony could tell that he'd been

speaking energetically about something. Loki was answering him, a note of childlike admiration reflected on his face.

Carefully, Tony tucked the photo back in where he'd found it. He smiled, just to himself. He knew better than to ever bring it up. The book slipped back easily onto the shelf where he'd found it. He wondered what else he could find in the shelves.

First though, Tony walked back into the bedroom to check on Loki. He was still asleep, and warm to the touch. Despite how Tony worried, there was something to be cherished about the moment. For once, Tony felt not just needed, but useful. It was a small, simple thing, but he could be there. He could handle this. Tony leaned against the doorframe, wondering melancholically if he'd ever be on this side of the bed again in his lifetime.

Chapter End Notes

Then again, Loki might not find sickness so amusing if he discovers Tony looking through all of his stuff.

Something That I Hadn't Expected

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“Open your mouth,” Bruce said for the third time.

“Come on,” Tony said, his patience spent. “Or I’ll do it for you.”

Loki glared at both of them, although it wasn’t particularly intimidating. Not with the sweat gathered along his face, or his flushed skin. “This is unnecessary,” Loki said. Bruce had an oral thermometer in his hand. He’d tossed the ear one into his bag when it’d kept giving him readouts ranging from twenty five to a hundred and eight degrees.

“If you’d just do it, we’d stop bothering you,” Tony said. The man had woken him up for the check-in, and he’d been anything but cooperative since then.

“Fine,” Loki growled, opening his mouth haughtily. Perhaps it wasn’t so fun being fawned over after all. He felt the thermometer jab at the back on his tongue. A moment later it beeped loudly.

“I guess that’s acceptable,” Bruce said. It was still at 102.5. “It’s the same,” he said to Tony. “I’m gonna have to get that other one replaced.”

“Thanks for coming down,” Tony said. Bruce nodded.

“I’ll check in again later,” he said, taking his things to leave. Tony waited until he heard the elevator doors close.

“You could be a little more cooperative,” he told Loki.

“Really,” Loki said, closing his eyes again. “You are making a fuss over nothing.”

“Nothing?” Tony asked. “Should I go upstairs then? I don’t want to sit down here for nothing when I’ve got a DVR full of recordings upstairs and a lab downstairs.”

Loki’s vivid green eyes were focused on Tony again. The man inclined his head to the side, smiling flippantly. He raised his eyebrows expectantly, waiting to hear a “no”. The blankets tucked back around Loki’s shoulders were hot, and he mentally complained about as much as he watched Tony. He could feel where the bed had sunk under Tony’s weight as he sat, leaning against Loki’s legs. Tony rubbed those long legs, waiting.

“Hmm, I guess I’ll be going then,” Tony said.

He rose up off the bed, tapping his hand against Loki’s legs again. Loki let Tony get all the way to the doorway before making a sound somewhere between a threat and a whine.

“What was that?” Tony said, turning back around. He rubbed at his ear as though it had wax in it.

“Stay,” Loki said stubbornly.

“Because?” Tony asked, walking back in. He sat back down on the bed, rubbing Loki’s legs from over the blankets.

“Stark, must you be so repulsively domestic?”

“Ah,” Tony said, standing back up. “I guess you don’t want me to stay then.”

“Quit making me repeat myself you pestilent mortal,” Loki snarled, his fever snapping the patience clean from him.

“You’re the one that’s pestilent,” Tony said, smiling wryly.

“Ha-ha,” Loki said. Tony sat back down beside him.

“Are you going to let me take care of you?” Tony asked. “Because I would like to. If you would let me,” he said, his voice dropping down lower.

“Why must I say it? Must you be so stubborn about it?” Loki replied.

“I’m not the one being stubborn,” Tony chided him. “And after someone here kept me from bleeding out, it’s the least I can do. Don’t you think?”

Tony knew he’d won that. Loki turned his head into the pillow. He considered telling Tony that he had a debt to pay, to play the situation off. But Loki didn’t want to open the conversation to talking about that time. “Alright,” he said. “I’ll tolerate Banner’s unnecessary attempts to improve my health.”

“Better,” Tony said. He glanced over at the bedside table, to where the soup remained untouched, as did the sports drinks and tea. Only the water had been consumed. “Now what would you like me to get you?”

“Water,” Loki answered. “And something less rich, something bland, like pudding,” he muttered.

“Now. Was that so hard?” Tony asked.

“Yes.”

Tony picked up the tray. “Go back to sleep,” he said. “I’ll be back up in a bit.” The glasses clinked noisily as he carried them out of the room. Loki stared at the ceiling for a while, uncertain on how to feel about the situation. Could he relinquish control to Tony? Did he like being cared for? His thoughts drifted as he fell back asleep.

“Uh-huh,” Tony was saying in the kitchen. “It surprised me too.”

“Well, do you need us to do anything?” Steve asked. “Oh, Tony, you shouldn’t make it like that.”

“What’s wrong with it?” Tony asked. He was making pudding on the stovetop from an instant box. Steve could smell it burning.

Sighing, Steve got up from the table and walked over. “Move aside,” he said. Tony thought it better than to argue with him. Steve turned the heat down and looked at the instant box’s instructions.

There was a clatter as the saucepan fell into the sink.

“What’d you do that for?” Tony said.

“It’s full of burnt clumps,” Steve said. “You can make a robotic suit but you can’t cook to save your life,” he said, shaking his head. “We’re going to make it from scratch. Get some cornstarch, sugar, and dry milk powder from the pantry. And salt. And vanilla beans.”

“Do we even have those?” Tony’s voice asked from across the kitchen.

“Yes,” Steve said tiredly.

Ten minutes later Natasha walked in just as Steve was showing Tony how to split open the vanilla beans. It wasn’t going particularly well, as Steve had a specific approach to doing it and Tony had none.

“You’re looking domestic,” she said.

“That seems to be the theme today,” Tony said. “Loki’s sick.”

“I know,” she said. Beside them she took a cup from the cabinet. “Bruce told me when I saw him in the elevator.” The faucet hissed as she filled her cup from the sink. “That’s unexpected,” she said, taking a sip. “I thought you and Loki would be leaving pretty soon.”

“Well, this does delay things,” Tony said. Steve had begun to sift the dry ingredients, ignoring Tony to concentrate on the task instead. “I mean, not that we had a set schedule or anything.”

“Are you going to have a goodbye party?” Natasha asked carefully.

Tony was thinking of how to answer that when the elevators opened again. Pepper walked in. “Hey Pepper,” he said.

“Hello Tony,” she said casually, walking past him to open a cabinet. As she began rifling through it, looking at different tea tins, Natasha asked about a goodbye party again. “I think that’s a wonderful idea,” Pepper said, turning around. Tony turned back around to face her and found that she had his favorite expression poised towards him. “You didn’t really think you’d get out of here without saying goodbye, right?”

“Of course not,” Tony bluffed.

“Well, let’s make it something low key this time,” Pepper said, turning her attention back to the tins in her hands. “Natasha and I don’t want a repeat of the last party we cleaned up after you at,” she said. It was a lighthearted jab, and Tony took it as such.

“No fireworks then,” Tony said.

“Precisely,” Pepper replied. She poured hot water from a kettle into her cup. Blooms of red unfurled in the water as she dropped the tea bag in. “When Loki’s feeling better we can all discuss what you’d like to do.”

“Alright,” Tony said. He smiled a little, humbled by how supportive they had become, so quickly. He did not realize that things had been changing little by little the whole time. The meeting and Thor’s outburst had only propelled things along.

“Tony,” Steve said, gesturing him over towards the stove. “You need to learn how to do this on your own,” he said. He put the wooden spoon in Tony’s hand. “I’m going to watch you stir this time so you don’t burn anything.”

“I can handle this,” Tony said.

“No you can’t,” Steve said, shaking his head but grinning nonetheless. Pepper was watching them with a sly, affectionate smile on the corner of her mouth. She took a seat next to Natasha at the table.

“How’s that deal brokering?” Natasha asked. Pepper began relaying to her the recent changes in the company. Things seemed to have picked up the pace. She’d been flying in and out of New York a lot recently. Tony listened keenly to them as they spoke. He hadn’t heard much about how the company was doing lately. Not that he needed to, but he did miss it. The company was doing phenomenally well under Pepper’s care, just as he’d expected.

“It’s done,” Steve said, turning off the heat.

“See?” Tony said. “Perfect.”

“Better than what’s in the sink right now,” Steve said. He went to go sit back down at the table as Tony poured the saucepan into a bowl to take downstairs.

“Hey,” Natasha said to Tony as he left to take the elevator. The billionaire turned back around to face her, holding a tray in his hands. “Don’t get yourself sick, okay?”

“I’ll tell my immune system to get right on that,” Tony said.

“Good,” Natasha said, grinning.

He heard his friends chattering behind him as the elevator doors closed. When he made it back into the bedroom, Loki was asleep again. Tony looked down at his watch. It was only seven in the evening. He set the tray down by the bed and rested his hand against Loki’s forehead. He was still warm, but he looked a little better than he had that morning. Tony decided to go back up to the kitchen and talk to everyone for a while before coming back down. Then he’d change into pajamas and fall asleep.

Loki slept through the night. He was surprised to find Tony sleeping beside him when he woke up, but glad. The fever was not nearly as miserable as it had been the day before, though it was still there. “Tony,” Loki whispered. The man shifted in the sheets. “Tony.”

“Hmmm,” Tony grumbled, lifting up his head. Not a second later he seemed to remember the situation. Swiftly he turned to face Loki, checking the god’s face for his condition. “What is it?” He asked. There were bags around his eyes and his hair was absolutely bedraggled.

“Can you go get some water?”

Without a word Tony reached over across him and snatched the glass up off the nightstand. He vanished behind the doorframe and came back a few seconds later. “Here,” he said, putting the glass into Loki’s hand.

Something had shifted in Loki. He tilted the glass, feeling the cold water circle past his hot palms. “I’ll be right back,” Tony said, leaving. Loki heard the bathroom faucet turn on in the next room over. Tony came back carrying a cold, wet cloth, that he pressed against Loki’s head. “How’re you feeling today?” He asked.

“Better,” Loki said. There was something nagging him, something that he wanted to say to Tony. He just wasn’t sure what it was.

“Good,” Tony said. “Would you like something for breakfast?” Loki nodded. “Are you willing to wait a bit?” Loki glanced at him, considering. Then he nodded. “Okay. I’ll be back in a while.”

Tony came back, about forty-five minutes later, showered, dressed, and carrying a bag from Loki’s

favorite bakery down the street. He sat down beside Loki on the bed, kicking off his shoes. The bag crinkled loudly as Tony uncurled the top, snapping the tape that held it closed.

The room was dim, but not dark. The main room was flooded with outside light, which came into the open bedroom generously.

Wordlessly, Tony passed a beignet over to Loki. The raven-haired god sat up in the bed, propping himself up against a pillow. Tony rifled through the bag and pulled out a chocolate donut for himself before setting the bag down on the bed. Loki turned the beignet over in his hands, watching the powdered sugar fall onto the sheets. He took a bite. It was still warm, and pleasantly sweet. He didn't mind the sticky mess that it made on his fingers, or the fact that the blankets were getting crumbs on them. They ate together in comfortable silence. Tony offered Loki another beignet, which he declined, choosing instead to lean back into his pillow and watch Tony help himself to another.

"It's not exactly health food," Tony said, rolling the paper bag closed. "So don't tell anyone. Tell them I gave you chicken soup for breakfast or something," Tony said, leaning over him and setting the bag down on the nightstand.

"I think I can manage a lie," Loki said, grinning.

"I don't know," Tony teased him. "It doesn't really seem to be your strong suit."

"I like that shirt you're wearing," Loki said, glancing down at the cranberry t-shirt.

Tony glared at him. Loki smiled innocently. "Fine," Tony said. He took the shirt off and dropped it over the side of the bed. "Happier?"

"Mhmm," Loki replied. Tony could see that he was getting tired again, and despite how much he was enjoying their morning, he thought it was time to let Loki sleep.

"Need anything else?" Tony asked. Loki shook his head, his eyelids lowering down peacefully, but still open enough to watch the man. "I'll be right outside," Tony said.

An hour later he heard his name being called from the bedroom.

"Can you get some water?"

"Yep," Tony said, taking the glass from his hand and returning shortly after.

Fifteen minutes later he heard his name again.

"It's cold in here."

Tony came back with an armful of blankets that piled over his head.

Ten minutes later he heard his name yet again.

"I'm bored."

Tony came back with a laptop. He clicked it open to an online streaming video service that Stark Industries ran. "You can watch anything you want," Tony said, setting the laptop in Loki's lap. Loki's fingers flicked across the track pad for a split second before he paused.

"What do you recommend?"

He heard Tony sigh beside him, but then the man was pulling up the covers and pushing him over in the bed. Loki accommodated him. Tony leaned in against him and took over the keyboard. He'd decided that they would be watching Mythbusters. Tony slid the laptop off of Loki's lap and took it into his own. He let Loki rest his warm head against him, and absently wondered if the god would fall asleep while they were watching.

It didn't seem to engage Loki much, but he waited a few episodes before finally losing interest. "Tony," he said. "What was that food you brought me yesterday?"

"Soup?" Tony asked, knowing exactly where the conversation was headed.

"Yes," Loki said. There was a mischievous, satisfied glint in his eye as he watched Tony sigh indulgently and get up out of the bed. He set the laptop back in Loki's lap.

"I'll be back," he said.

Upstairs in the kitchen, Tony found that Clint and Steve were already present. Clint was finishing up a sandwich and sounding off about something happening at SHIELD to Steve. Tony quietly heated up the stove behind them.

The soup was halfway heated before Clint left. "I'm not going to burn it," Tony said to Steve as he turned around.

"I showed you how not to," Steve said, grinning. "About Clint," he said apprehensively, "don't worry about it. He just needs some time to work things out on his own. You don't need to push the issue."

"Wasn't planning on it," Tony said curtly.

"Clint'll miss you when you're not around as much," Steve said. "He'll see that when you're gone."

"I won't be gone," Tony said. "Not around as much, but I'll be here when you need me."

"Yeah," Steve said. "But it won't be the same. I won't be showing you how to cook, for one thing."

"You won't miss that part," Tony said, trying to keep it light hearted.

"No," Steve agreed. "But I'll miss finding you passed out sleeping in the living room and wandering up here to make coffee at one in the afternoon." Tony took the soup off of the stove and began pouring it into a bowl. "You'll have to come back and visit often."

"Okay," Tony said, not knowing if it was a lie or not.

"How's he doing?" Steve asked.

"Better," Tony said. "A lot better, I think. I should probably take this up there while it's still hot."

"Alright," Steve said. Tony didn't make eye contact with him when he left. Thoughts of a goodbye party were starting to make him anxious.

Loki grinned up at him from the computer when Tony walked in. He couldn't see what Loki was watching, but it involved a lot of crowds screaming. Tony set the soup down on the nightstand. Loki closed the laptop and set it down beside him on the bed before picking up the bowl of soup.

“It must be nice to have such a handsome guy to take care of you,” Tony said. Loki slurped the soup loudly, pointedly. “It’s okay if you’re overwhelmed by it. I understand.”

Loki watched Tony silently as he finished off his soup, taking his time. The man did not grow any more humble in the meantime. The bowl thudded as it was set down on the tray.

“Pestilent,” Loki said.

“Stubborn,” Tony said. He reached out his hand and felt Loki’s forehead. It was still warm. “You should try and sleep some more.” Tony rose up off the bed and was glad when Loki didn’t argue with him. He took the laptop. “Bruce’ll be up in a while to check in. And don’t argue about it,” he added.

He walked over to one of Loki’s armchairs and sat down. Taking out a tablet, he began to read.

“Stark,” Tony heard clearly thirty minutes later.

“Yes?” Tony called back from the main room. He knew Loki was feeling better.

There was a pause. “It’s cold in here.”

“There’s a pile of blankets beside the bed,” Tony called back.

Silence again.

“They are not satisfactory.”

“Not satisfactory,” Tony repeated, appearing at the bedroom door. “They’re the ones you made with your magic or whatever!”

“They are not satisfactory,” Loki repeated.

“Then I’ll pull the ones off my bed,” Tony said. “But they’re not 5 million thread count like yours, and I don’t want to hear any complaints.”

“Fine,” Loki said.

Ten minutes later Tony returned downstairs with the sheets from his bed. He threw his rough blankets over on top of the god. Loki was quiet for a minute before coming up with another request. “I require food.”

Tony glanced over at the nightstand, but as it was empty, he didn’t have much to argue with. He returned back a few minutes later with more than Loki could’ve eaten in an entire week. “This water is too warm,” Loki said.

“You’re fine,” Tony said.

Loki coughed pathetically.

“You have a fever, not a cough,” Tony said. Loki coughed again.

“Perhaps one of your mortal diseases has come to claim my life.”

“I doubt that,” said Tony. He turned away as he heard the elevators open. Bruce came into the room.

Loki allowed Bruce to take his temperature without arguing, but only because Tony was glaring at him from over Bruce's shoulder, making a throat slitting motion with his finger.

"Well," Bruce said. "You're down to 99. I think you're going to be fine."

"Thanks for coming to check in," Tony said. Bruce was looking at the nightstand with concern.

"I don't think that cookies are an appropriate health food," Bruce said. "Or chips. Or soda. Or... why is all of that there, exactly?"

"Uh, you know," Tony said, laughing it off. "Indecisive." Bruce shook his head knowingly.

"Alright. Call me if you need anything."

"Okay," Tony said.

"This water is too warm," Loki said, even before Bruce had made it back into the elevator.

"Oh?" Tony said. He leaned down over Loki from beside the bed. "I could go upstairs and get you another glass," he said. "But then who would watch a movie with you?"

"You can do both," Loki replied.

Tony scoffed. "Fine," he said. "But I'm getting myself a beer."

When he returned they spent the rest of the evening in bed together, watching the laptop. It was actually Tony that succumbed to sleep first. Loki slid the laptop away, closing it and setting it over on the nightstand. A bag of chips fell to the floor as he shoved it aside to make room. He lifted up the covers and pulled them over the both of them, tucking them in. Comfortably, he closed his eyes.

Chapter End Notes

Whelp, I managed to get sick myself this week (recovering now), so I figured I'd better hurry and get the mischief maker out of his own predicament. So much fluff (there's not enough sickfic in the world, ever). And no one attempted an attack on Loki or drama while he was sick, I'm being far too nice. ;)

The Last Decision That I Had to Make

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Even in the dream he was stifled by stuffy heat, discomfort permeating through each of his senses. He could not remember what events had led him to the dream now, but he was staring at a golden cage filled with soft, white birds. Among them perched a red one in the middle of them, watching him.

“Would you just come out of there already?” Loki said with frustration.

He wanted the red bird. The logic of the dream told him that the white birds were harmless, and he knew instantly that he’d considered having them before. They were useful, meaty little birds. He remembered that. Still, they were beautiful and he sensed that it would do well to let them live. The red bird buried its head in among the snowy down of the other birds. Loki sighed irritably. His craving to destroy the other birds had died. He knew the red one would come to him.

He picked up the cage. The sound of doves cooing noisily, flustered by the action, poured into his ears.

They cooed louder and louder as Loki turned the weighty cage around, searching the gold bars for the door. He paused. The red bird looked out at Loki from among his comrades, watching him still. “Fine,” Loki said dryly, popping open the little golden door. At once the birds came fluttering out. Their wings beat loudly around him. He felt the familiar grip of the red bird’s talons in his shoulder. He meant to say something to the bird, but he was distracted by what he saw on the floor. One of the white bird’s wings was injured, and it was hopping along, dragging its limp feathers against the floor.

The white birds were perching on his shoulders and down his arms, still chortling and cooing loudly. “Be gone!” He snapped, waving his arms. The birds flew up and landed back down on him like heavy balloons floating back down to the places they’d been thrown from. He tried again and again to escape the birds, but they would not relent. He heard the crimson bird on his shoulder chirp loudly.

“How nice,” a familiar voice said.

Loki saw a black bird, perched some distance off from him. He glared up at it, not speaking. He’d seen the iridescent bird before, in other dreams. Its colorful feathers glinted like a prism in the light as it shook out its heavy, black wings. Pressed together, the feathers had none of their radiant color.

“Isn’t it though?” said the bird.

He felt a sharp stab in his side. He wanted to say something to the bird, but the pain was calling him back to the waking world.

Loki heard Tony mumble beside him and opened his eyes. Tony had managed to wedge his foot up against Loki’s side. Sighing, Loki reached over and pushed the man over, pulling him back to sleeping upright in the bed. The man kicked in his sleep again, narrowly missing Loki’s mirthless face. Loki rolled back over in the bed, closing his eyes. He was sweating from the fever again and all he wanted was sleep.

“You’re back,” said the bird.

Loki was dressed in full battle regalia. He could feel his helmet weighing heavily upon his head. As per usual, he ignored the discomfort of his armor, instead taking the pain as a badge of his pride.

He looked at the ornate door before him. It was made of a heavy, thick metal, carved into vast, intricate designs. Loki put his hand onto the handle. "Do you think you'll make it through this time?" The bird asked.

"What do you mean?"

"Do you think you'll make it through the door?" The bird asked.

"Of course I'll make it through a *door*," Loki said condescendingly.

The bird made the same cooing, chortling sound as the white birds had. Its eye glinted as it glared pensively at him, electing to watch Loki try instead.

The god pressed down on the handle, expecting to walk straight through. Instantly, the door was shorter. He could not see what it led to, only nothingness. Loki could not fit through the door as he was, he'd have to stoop.

He crouched down, expecting again to pass through.

The nothingness was impermeable.

"You cannot stoop under that door," the bird said. "That door must be walked through with one's head held high."

Loki looked at the doorframe. He could just pass through it if he were not wearing the helmet. He fell silent, contemplating.

"What are you going to do?" Said the bird.

Oh, how the bird frustrated him.

"I do not know," Loki said. Taking off the helmet felt unnerving. He wasn't sure that he could do it. Not that it was impossible, but because in the dream he was hesitating. He just wasn't certain. If he took the helmet off to pass through the door, what would happen to him? What if he needed it? He did need it! Of course he did.

"You made the same decision last night," said the bird.

"What do you mean?" Loki said, turning around to face the bird. It had turned its head to the side again, evaluating him with just one eye, as it seemed to favor doing.

In waiting for the bird to answer, Loki could feel the ache of the fever returning to his consciousness. Even in sleep he could not escape its discomfort.

"Your fever," the bird said knowingly. It jumped down from its perch and hopped along the ground, coming closer to him. "It will not leave you until you decide."

"I do not recall coming here," Loki said.

"And you won't," the bird said. "Not until you make the decision that you seem to want to make."

Loki had turned his attention back to the door. He knew undoubtedly that he wanted to pass

through it. Of that he was absolutely certain.

“Your body remembers this,” said the bird. “That is why it suffers.”

Another time Loki would’ve lost his patience with the bird. He would’ve snapped its neck or cast it away, knowing it would return. It always did. This time however, he sensed that he needed it.

“Explain,” he said.

“See for yourself,” said the bird, shaking. Its feathers rose and ruffled up along its neck. “Go through the door.”

Loki glanced down at the bird and the back to the door. He took in a long, steady breath. Steadily, his arms rose to his head, where his fingers slipped in against the cold, slick gold metal. Very carefully, he removed the helmet. Chilly air greeted his warm head, soothing him. He did not turn to look back at the bird. Ignoring it, he pressed the handle down again, and found that this time he could walk through the nothingness.

His heart felt lighter the moment that his feet made contact with the ground on the other side. He sensed in the dream logic that he could put his helmet back on. It had only been necessary to remove it to go through the door.

This new place was brighter, luminous even. He wasn’t entirely sure what it looked like, or felt like. All that he was certain of was that he felt better. Peaceful.

“Finally,” the bird said, hopping up alongside his feet. Loki glanced down at the bird. “I’ve been waiting,” it said.

“For what?” Loki asked.

“You know what,” said the bird.

Chapter End Notes

I'd love to hear your interpretations, but I can't confirm any this time. It'd interfere with the chapter that is to come. Thank you for reading as always, I hope it's enjoyable.

You Were Right About That, At Least

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Sunlight was pouring itself into the windowless bedroom through the open doorway, casting long shadows in the places where the sheets dipped down and under its grasp. Tony was still asleep, his mouth slack and unflattering, but endearing, perhaps. But mostly unflattering. There was stubble on his face and his warmly toned hair was sticking out in different directions from the pillow. It was a routine sight that Loki had become comfortably accustomed to recently.

Perhaps that was what had triggered it. The bird had not cared to explain what *it* was, precisely. Maybe it was emotion still lingering from the wake of Tony's confession. Not that it mattered. It was over, and Loki remembered it now, just as he'd been told. He had come to that door repeatedly, refusing to remove his armor to enter, and regretting it awfully in the time that followed. Until it had made him sick.

Tony was starting to stir, probably because he could feel that someone was watching him. He shut his mouth and squinted his eyes, struggling to come out of sleep. When he did finally open his eyes, he saw Loki staring at him from the adjacent pillow.

Tony searched the god's face, trying to assess him. There was a beguiling smile on Loki's lips, something soft and assured all at once. Tony looked away and then back. He had never caught Loki looking at him like this before. Not directly.

"Are you going to say good morning or is this like..." Loki was still staring, still smiling. The kind of smile that Tony really had to work for. He didn't just wake up beside it. "Hello?"

Loki grinned slowly, luxuriating in the feel of his lips pulling back to reveal his teeth.

"Are you feeling okay?" Tony reached out his hand and found that Loki's forehead was cool for the first time in a few days. "What is it?" Tony said, taking his hand back. "You're starting to freak me out."

He was just on the brink of getting up from the bed when Loki spoke. "I love you," he said. Simply. Honestly. Tony froze. The L-word. Not once had he heard it. Not that he needed to, he knew. He could read Loki better than the trickster realized. Still, Loki waltzed around the word and said it other ways, ways that he could still back out of. Ways that allowed him to keep his pride.

"That's it," Tony said, sitting up in the bed. "I'm getting Bruce. The fever definitely did some damage. It probably burnt up half your brain cells," Tony said, kicking back the covers. He swung his legs over the side of the bed and stood up.

"Tony," Loki said commandingly. "Come back here."

Tony took his time in turning around, defiance on his face even before he looked at Loki. The god glanced at the bed and then back at Tony pointedly, making it abundantly clear that he would like Tony back in that bed.

"This is going to turn into some episode of the body snatchers, I'm sure of it," Tony said.

Loki still had some good humor to him, and perhaps to show Tony that he was feeling better, or

perhaps to get back at Tony for becoming flustered, he pulled Tony towards him with a loop of green magic. “Kinky,” Tony said flatly as it sat him back down.

“Tony Stark,” Loki said, reaching his arm over and pulling Tony’s head in close to his face, “Am I not allowed to say those words?”

“If this is the warm up to I’m pregnant...”

Loki laughed softly. “No,” he said. “No.”

Tony was leaning down over him now, searching for an answer. Loki could see that analytical light going on in his brain, assessing everything. Loki continued to gently hold Tony’s face in his hands. He was enjoying Tony’s confusion, whether that was unkind or not. “I wanted to say them because they are mine to say,” Loki said. “And I wanted you to hear them.”

He could hear Tony breathing faster. Tony was trying to decide whether to be concerned or suspicious or turned on (as the mysterious charm that usually clung to Loki radiated ten times brighter right then) or defiant. “You sure you’re not about to eat my face off or stick me through a worm hole?” Tony asked, eyes narrowing.

“I can do that too if you like,” Loki said, not really seeming to care whether or not Tony repeated the words back to him. He had told Tony what he wanted to tell him, and he felt immensely better for it. It was as though he had something wonderful now, something that belonged all to him, and would not be taken. The words were his to say, as archaic and unaccustomed to his tongue as they may have been.

“No,” Tony said, “I’m good. I like my face. But if it’s the same to you, I’m still going to have Bruce check on you.”

Loki pulled him into a mouthy kiss, one that he was pleased to find that Tony gave into easily, and one that Tony was surprised that Loki let him out of. He leaned up and got out of the bed for the second time that morning. Loki did not stop him again, but instead watched lazily as Tony left, intent on finding Bruce.

He smiled again then, a languid, joyful morning smile that was all his own.

True, he thought, as he rolled over in the bed, listening to the sheets whisper in the movement, he could very well be as wicked as he wanted to be. Yet, the bird had been right, infuriating as that was. He had been waiting for this. For the time when he would allow himself the joy of being loved, instead of guarding against it. When was the last time he’d said he loved some one? Oh, yes, it had been in anger, concerning his family.

He stared up at the ceiling then, thinking what a wicked sense of humor fate had, placing his path back to genuine contentment in his once enemy’s bed.

“Tony,” Bruce said, his voice hitting a note a bit too high to be casual. “We thought you were still upstairs.”

“It’s only seven thirty,” Steve confirmed, looking back at the clock.

Tony had wanted to blurt out all of what was happening right then because he needed another soul to know just how weird his world had gotten. Now he wanted to know what his two teammates were hiding from him.

“Out with it,” Tony said, gesturing behind them. They were blocking something on the table, thinking that he couldn’t notice. Steve and Bruce glanced at each other and then back at him. Steve’s captain face came on. “Nope,” Tony said before Steve could get a word out. “Jarvis, tell me what’s on the table.”

“Jarvis,” Bruce said, “Don’t.”

“Sir,” Jarvis said. “I have been programmed not to acknowledge Project X.”

“Project X?” Tony said, voice climbing. “You’re, what is this, is this---“ His eyebrows mingled somewhere between anger and disbelief.

“It’s a surprise,” Bruce said with exasperation. “And it would stay a surprise if you would stick to your usual sleeping hours.”

“Oh,” Tony said, coming back down. Then curiosity took over. Bruce wasn’t sure which he feared more.

“No,” Bruce said, noting that Tony was already looking in the reflections of the room for a better, subtle glance at the table. “Go back in the elevator and wait.”

“You can’t kick me out of my own kitchen,” Tony said, craning his head to get a better look.

“Get out!” Steve commanded. “Come back in five minutes.”

“Tell you what,” Tony said. “I wanted Bruce to come check on Loki and see that everything’s alright. Why don’t you just come down when you’re ready.”

“Okay,” Bruce said, watching Tony’s eyes carefully. The man walked backward to the elevator with his hands held up in the air. He stepped back into the open elevator and smiled in a poor imitation of innocence.

Two seconds later he was asking Jarvis for the security feed to the kitchen.

He was denied.

Steve and Bruce were laughing softly in the kitchen, shaking their heads, as Jarvis told them that Mr. Stark had attempted to access Project X. They’d better get on with it if they didn’t want Tony’s curiosity to outdo them.

“Well,” Bruce said, using a flashlight to peer down Loki’s throat. He was really only going through the motions for Tony’s benefit. It was clear to him the moment he walked in that Loki was feeling much better. “It seems to have subsided.”

“There’s not any...damage?” Tony asked.

Loki glared at him. Tony shrugged his shoulders, as if that had been a perfectly ordinary thing to say.

“Damage?” Bruce asked. “Why?”

“No, oh, I don’t know,” Tony said, waving his hand around, “things that would cause confusion or rapid changes in personality?”

Loki continued to glare at him, though he was resigned about it. Bruce set down his bag and looked over at Loki and then back at Tony. "Do I want to know," he asked unenthusiastically.

"Actually, Dr. Banner, I was rather hoping that you could inspect Mr. Stark," Loki said, "he seems to be rather unwell."

"Sit down," Bruce said to Tony.

"Not necessary," Tony said, shaking his head.

"I think he has rather the same symptoms I did," Loki said, crossing his arms, "and I would hate to see what a little sniffle for me would do to a mortal like you."

The words were not unkind, and Bruce found himself wanting to play along with them. "Sit down," he repeated.

Tony did so, only so that he could defiantly stick his tongue out at Loki, pretending that it was for the tongue depressor. The god grinned, enjoying watching Tony get poked and prodded as unnecessarily as he felt that he had. Though, Tony was more fun to watch. He put more sass into it. "Breathe," Bruce said, pressing the cold stethoscope to his back. "Hmm, yep," he said. "Arc reactor's just as loud as ever. And you still have lungs. Congrats. I think you're fine."

"See?" Tony said to Loki.

"I'll send you the bill later," Bruce said light heartedly, grabbing his things.

"How much?" Tony asked. "X amount of dollars?" He said, alluding to the project far too bluntly for Bruce's taste.

"It'll be zero dollars if you keep that up," Bruce said.

"I win either way then."

Bruce shook his head, smiling a bit, and left.

"What did he mean by that?" Loki asked.

Tony turned to him, a light bulb coming on. "You can spy on something for me," Tony said. "Tell me what project they're working on."

"Hmm," Loki said, "What do I get in return?"

"Well," Tony said, straddling himself over the god, "we could see where else the conversation from this morning could go." He leaned down and brushed his lips along Loki's neck before sucking hard at the hollow of his shoulder.

He felt Loki's throat vibrate with a laugh. "You're not even showered," Loki said, combing his fingers through Tony's hair.

"Says the plague!" Tony said indignantly. "You've been in this bed for what, three days?"

"Tony," Loki said musically. He was getting that look on his face from that morning and it was making Tony both anxious and eager. "Go." Tony hesitated. "I'm not a charitable morning person," he reminded Tony.

Except for this morning, Tony thought. Relenting, he got out of the bed and stretched. "But I've got

plans for you,” Tony promised.

“I should hope so,” Loki replied, grinning again. He watched Tony disappear from sight and fell back asleep as he listened to the water run in the next room over.

Chapter End Notes

You can ask me to clarify anything if you'd like (within limits of course ;). Yes, the white birds were the Avengers, Tony being red of course, and Loki's pestilent black bird is a facet of himself seen in an earlier chapter (20). No, I cannot clarify Project X, nice try. ;)

Please Say That You Will

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“I’ve never used it,” Tony said. He was watching Steve attempt to repair the espresso machine in the kitchen. “The regular coffee maker works just fine.”

“Yeah,” Steve said. “But why do you have it then?”

“It looked cool,” Tony said, shrugging.

Steve cracked a tired smile but said nothing. He wasn’t entirely sure what he was looking at, or how to fix it, but he figured that he would work it out or happen along the answer eventually. He could practically feel Tony watching him with an uncontrollable desire to fix it himself.

“I’m going down to the car show today,” Steve said.

“Oh?” Tony asked. “I didn’t realize that there was one going on.”

“I thought it would be cool to look around,” Steve said. “Pepper brought down tickets for us and friends last night. She said your company was promoting at the show.”

Tony looked down at the mug of coffee in his hands. With Loki having been sick, Tony hadn’t been around the last night. Pepper wouldn’t have had much of an opportunity to reach him.

Or rather, she hadn’t *needed* to reach him. It wasn’t necessary for him to go now, and before they’d broken up she would’ve been asking him to speak at the show and make appearances to promote. He would’ve been fighting her the entire time. Or agreeing just to duck out as soon as his speech was over and make a bee line to the bar or dance floor or anything that didn’t feel like work. Still, there had always been something to his liking about her chasing after him. Needing to reach him.

“You should come,” Steve said casually.

“I will,” Tony said, as though it were the most simple thing in the world. He wouldn’t tell Steve that it was because he was just starting to get a glimpse of how life in New York would move on without him. Pepper would be running his company. Steve would be casually attending car shows without Tony leading him by the nose, rambling off about tech specifications. “What time is it at?”

“I was going to go down around noon or one,” Steve said.

“Awesome,” Tony said. “I’ll be there.” He set his coffee down on the table and walked over to where Steve was. “Let me,” he said, unable to watch any longer.

“I can figure it out,” Steve protested. Tony ignored him. To Steve’s chagrin, the machine seemed to fix itself, simply because of Tony’s presence. It was because it didn’t take much for Tony to figure out the mechanics, but it seemed like magic nonetheless.

“There,” Tony said, stepping aside. Steve looked to him and back to the machine.

“Thanks,” he said, out of politeness. He really just wanted to stare at it, irritated that he couldn’t do what Tony had just done.

They heard the elevator doors opening.

“Where have you been?” Loki said, walking in. He was dressed in Asgardian clothing, his long hair slicked back and flipped over his shoulders.

“Look,” Tony said cheerfully, holding up one of the auto show tickets that Pepper had left on the table. Loki glanced down at the narrow strip of paper in Tony’s hands.

“You can come too,” Steve said.

“I thought we had plans today,” Loki said to Tony.

“Plans changed,” Tony said flippantly. “This is going to be amazing. I mean, Stark Industries is involved so it’s already going to be incredible, but it’ll definitely be awesome.”

Loki’s lips pressed into a thin line. He glanced away from Tony and over at Steve. The captain was watching them casually, waiting for an answer. There was no need to upset him.

“They’ll have prototype cars that aren’t on the market yet, even for private buyers,” Tony said. To his ears it was enticing, but to the other men in the room it had little meaning. “There’s a Japanese car that uses pressure sensors to measure your butt print to start the car,” Tony said. “Come on, that’s kinda cool.”

Loki’s head turned quickly towards Tony. He had been expecting a slow, sensual, bare skinned day after their morning conversation. Yet when he’d awoken again, rather than finding that Tony was back from the shower, the man was gone. Tony had said he had plans for the god. Loki’s frustration at the change in direction for the day was quickly giving way to a quiet, disappointed anger.

“I’ll drive,” Steve offered. He had the distinct feeling that if he let Tony drive, the man would be zipping in and out of traffic on the freeway to impress the god in the car. “I’ll drive,” Steve repeated the moment he heard Tony open his mouth.

“Okay,” Tony said, slightly surprised by Steve’s insistence.

Loki took the passenger side seat without giving Tony a chance to argue for it. He said nothing as he opened the door and sat inside. Tony took the backseat, uncomfortably aware of how irked Loki had become, and clueless as to why. Not that Loki was letting on about it exactly. Not outside of the quiet, sharp way he carried himself. He was perfectly friendly with Steve.

Tony decided to fill the car ride with chatter.

They parked outside of a large convention center. When the car came to a halt, Loki glanced outside, taking in the size of the building. There were large crowds coming in and out. It was noisy and lively. Loki phased his clothing into something casual with a faint flash of gold.

Tony was the first one out of the car, and Steve and Loki followed closely behind him. Steve smiled as a little boy pointed towards them, animatedly telling his father that Captain America was there.

Loki sighed loudly. Tony felt a familiar magic flicker warmly across his skin. He glanced back at Loki and Steve. Loki nodded at him knowingly. Steve seemed none the wiser. Tony turned back around. He didn’t want to be recognized either.

In fact, now that he thought on it, he couldn't remember the last time that he'd gone into public without someone recognizing him.

Inside the convention center was much louder, and far more interesting. The crowd filled in around sectioned off platforms, eagerly pointing up at cars and taking pictures.

"That's a Tesla," Tony said. "It runs off electricity."

"And that's a Bugatti Veyron Super Sport," he said, walking up to another car. "It's the fastest car in the world. Well, aside from a prototype I was working on."

"This is a Lamborghini Veneno, one of the most expensive."

"And that's a---"

"1942 Chevrolet Master DeLuxe," Steve said. Tony looked back at him. He grinned, outdone. "It's a little more worn out than the one I drove," Steve said. "The one I took for a spin from an officer, that is." Tony's eyes flickered with interest.

"Let's hear it," Tony said.

"He deserved it," Steve said.

The story turned to chatter in Loki's inattentive ears. Tony and Steve were really enjoying each other's company that day. It only added to Loki's annoyance. Not because he was jealous, but because Tony's excitement for the car show was so bright. Loki failed to notice that Tony was talking faster than usual, and working to impress Steve.

He hung back from them, watching the people in the crowd. There was nothing remarkable about anyone, though it was mildly interesting. For a fleeting moment he wished he could tell them to kneel, just for the thrill.

He spotted a familiar head of hair far across the convention center. Loki glanced over at Tony and Steve and then back across the enormous room. Steve caught his eye as he looked over at them again. Loki pointed across the room. Steve nodded. Tony's back was to him.

Loki made no effort to walk, but instead vanished from the car display and across the room. He appeared just a few steps away. Pepper nodded in recognition. She was in the middle of speaking to a man in a suit. Loki waited for a minute as she diverted the man's attention to one of the assistants that was with her.

"I didn't expect to see you here," Pepper said conversationally.

"I didn't expect to come," Loki said. "I was unaware of this event until today, actually." One of the assistants glanced over at Pepper talking to an indistinguishable man and lost interest before the thought fully entered his mind. Loki was allowing Pepper to see through the disguise, but no one else. "Tony's here too," Loki said quietly.

Pepper said nothing in response. She just glanced down at the papers in her hand, smiling uncomfortably. Loki had a moment of doubt.

"This is all for your business?" He asked.

“Oh no,” Pepper said, “we’re just one of the sponsors.” She smiled with relief. “I wouldn’t want to have to organize this entire thing.”

“You seem capable,” Loki said.

It was harder to make conversation now. Before, it was as though the script had been written for them. Their motivations had been so clear. Now they knew that there were things they wanted to say, but what those words were was unclear.

Pepper brushed a lock of hair back behind her ear. “We were talking about organizing a goodbye party for you and Tony,” she said, her voice growing softer with the last word. “You’re uh---“ She pressed the papers against her chest anxiously. “Leaving soon, aren’t you?”

Loki had crossed his arms across his chest uncomfortably. “Yes,” he said.

“If you could give us an exact date,” Pepper said, “so we could plan...”

One of the assistants needed her for a question from one of the show’s attendees. Yet every time they glanced over at Pepper, they lost interest in asking. The assistant struggled to answer the question on their own, unable to comprehend why their mind was acting so strangely.

“Perhaps two weeks,” Loki suggested. He hadn’t discussed it with Tony yet. Two weeks seemed generous to Loki, who had never lost an acute awareness of how short time was.

Pepper nodded. They both sensed that there was more to be said, and neither could figure out how to go about it exactly.

“You’ll visit?” Pepper asked. “Tony said something about that.”

“Yes,” Loki said. “From time to time.” He saw Pepper looking back over at her assistants, worrying about whether they needed her. He had been sincere when he said that he liked Pepper. She was clever and ambitious. Not that he was sorry that he had bested her, but he had come to respect Pepper in their time together. A quiet understanding had existed between them, and they had allied together against Tony as well. For his benefit.

Pepper was quieter now. She was no longer challenging him as she had. She simply accepted his presence. He rather missed the fiery woman from before. “You’ll be welcome in the tower, of course,” Pepper said. She wasn’t looking at him, but at the crowd. Steve and Tony were slowly cutting their way across the room towards them.

Loki nodded. Perhaps this was going to be as close to what they wanted to say as they were going to get. In an instant, Loki remembered the bottle of his favorite liquor that Pepper had given him after he’d allied with her over Tony’s recklessness and his scrapped Iron Man suit.

Quietly, he held out his hand, his palm facing the floor. Pepper glanced down at it and back up at his face. She searched his eyes suspiciously, finding nothing. “Put out your hand,” he said, slightly annoyed. He wasn’t entirely sure whether he wanted to do this or not.

She extended her hand curiously. They met in the middle. Her hand was warm as it pressed against Loki’s. She felt something heavy and cool drop into her palm. “Use it wisely,” he said as he pulled his hand away.

In her soft fingers there was a heavy blue jewel attached to silver metal with a dull sheen. The light that hit the jewel curled into the depths of its cerulean color, disappearing. It took Pepper a moment to pull her attention away. “What is it?” She asked, careful to keep her reaction level.

"I believe the Midgardian equivalent is a worry stone," Loki said.

"If this is because you feel guilty---" Pepper said quietly.

"No," Loki said with such enthusiasm that there was no room for doubt. "Think of it as a goodbye and nothing else."

Pepper turned the stone over in her hands. She wasn't sure what to say. Whatever it was that she wanted to say to Loki, it was something that had no regards to Tony. She sensed that whatever the nebulous thing was that was passing between them, this was it. This was Loki saying it.

Cupping the pendant in her hand, Pepper looked up at him. Something quiet was communicated, unspoken between them then. A weight had lifted from both of them.

"Excuse me," Tony's voice said from a few feet away. The two turned to see Steve and Tony pushing through the crowd. Pepper slipped the pendant into her pocket, sensing that it should go unseen.

"Pardon," Steve said, pushing through the last row of people. "Hey Pepper."

"Hello," she said.

"Thanks for the tickets," Steve said.

"Don't mention it," she said.

"We had a car in the show last year, didn't we?" Tony asked.

"Yes, but we aren't pursuing automotive sales this year so we didn't invest in a car," Pepper said. She had noticed that Loki was standing on the other side of Steve, not by Tony. She knew the look he had. It was one she'd worn many times before. She thought it better not to ask. "Did you get a chance to see what the engineering team has been working on?"

Pepper called over to one of the assistants.

The assistant jumped, recognizing Tony. "Show me what you've got," Tony said, ignoring the man's shock. The assistant brought him over to the Stark Industries table to speak with the engineers. Steve began talking to Pepper about other things and Loki found himself losing interest again.

Not long after, Pepper left to speak to her team and return to promoting the company. Steve began telling Loki about one of the cars at the show, though he could sense that Loki wasn't really interested.

"He'll be there a while," Steve said, gesturing over at Tony. "Let's go look at what else is on the floor." He smiled warmly, sensing only that Loki was bored. The god followed after him eagerly, glad to be moving.

"So, do you have cars on Asgard?" Steve ventured as they pushed past a group taking photos.

Loki paused. "Not like this," he said. "Though I've seen this technology advanced in several forms."

"Huh?"

"Vehicles that navigate themselves," Loki said. "Until teleportation is achieved. Then these

become obsolete, except for certain instances.”

“Oh,” Steve said. He’d become accustomed to feeling like he lived in science fiction, but Loki always tested that boundary.

“That must be...” He wasn’t sure what to say. Wonderful? Amazing?

“Boring,” Loki said. “There are far more interesting things in the universe,” he said. They were approaching the edge of the main exhibit room, and Steve could see restaurants in the outer halls of the convention center.

“Why don’t you tell me about them,” Steve said. “Have you had lunch yet?”

“No,” Loki said. Steve’s company was a welcome distraction from his annoyance with Tony.

“I’ve been looking for you everywhere,” Tony said an hour and a half later. “I called your cell, where---” He looked at Steve and Loki and then deemed them both incapable of using a cell phone. “You know what, forget it.”

“Sorry,” Steve said. “I couldn’t hear it over the noise in here.” It was true. The restaurant had been loud. “Besides, I thought you’d like time to catch up with your company.”

He was right. Tony had enjoyed catching up. Until he’d realized that Loki and Steve were missing. In fact, Tony had lost track of time and hadn’t really been looking for them that long.

“You’re fine,” Loki said coldly.

Tony looked at him with a note of hurt that he covered up quickly. “Well, I guess we should be going anyway,” he said.

“Or you could sit right here,” Steve said, pulling out a chair at the table. “I’m sure the waitress wouldn’t mind bringing a menu over.” He craned his head around Tony to get a look around the restaurant and find the waitress. Loki and Tony took the opportunity to lock eyes. Tony wasn’t sure what Loki was upset about, and it made him angry. Had Loki not just said the word love that morning? And now this?

Steve had caught the waitresses’ eye. “Just get the check,” Tony said. The last thing he wanted was an awkward dinner date.

Steve had really been enjoying the story that Loki was in the middle of, and he had no idea why Tony wanted to leave other than impatience. “Come on,” Steve said. “We don’t have that much time to spend dinner together anyways, so sit down.”

Tony took the seat. Whether it was because of the demand in Steve’s voice or the guilt tripping, he didn’t know. He didn’t even call Steve out on it.

The waitress gave him a menu and he ordered a drink. Steve baited Loki back into finishing his story, though it took a little prodding. He wasn’t nearly as animated now that Tony had sat down.

After a while things returned to their usual pace. Loki had long, complicated stories about different realms he’d snuck off into. Though Tony said little, he found himself longing to partake in the adventures that Loki was describing. He was excited to go off and adventure with Loki, and the sour mood between them that afternoon only made that wanting painful.

Steve was really enjoying Loki's stories too, and that annoyed Tony. He wished that they were back on the exhibit floor so that he could be the one talking.

Eventually, the dinner did come to an end, and the waitress brought the check. As Steve took out his wallet (after insisting that he pay), Tony felt Loki's foot brush against him under the table. Tony glanced up. Loki was staring at him, his eyes dark and focused. Tony wasn't sure what to make of it. The moment was gone not a second later as Steve handed over the check to the waitress and Loki acted as though nothing was out of the ordinary.

The car ride home was quiet for Tony. Steve and Loki's voices softly made up background noise as Tony watched outside the windows. The sun had set. Building lights reflected against the car window as they drove along, creating long arcs across the glass. Tony leaned his head against the window, irritably losing himself in his own thoughts.

Steve parted ways with them after parking in the tower garage, saying that he was going to go upstairs and paint for a while. Loki and Tony were left to enter into the elevator alone.

Neither of them pressed a floor button. Tony was waiting to see if Loki chose his own floor. They had been staying on Loki's floor more often than Tony's recently. So if Tony chose his own floor, did that mean that Loki would be by himself? As Tony debated Loki leaned forward and pressed the thirteenth floor.

Tony became more and more agitated as the floors chimed past them. He hadn't hit the button to his own floor, yet.

The doors opened and Loki stepped out towards the floor. He paused in the doorway. "Aren't you coming?"

He turned back. Tony was leaning against the elevator wall, his arms crossed, his face glowering defensively. "I don't know, can I?"

"Come out onto this floor right this instance," Loki growled.

"No," Tony said.

"Anthony Stark," Loki said, refusing to move. "You make me wait through an entire day of your insipid mortal technology show and now you won't come out of an elevator? You have tried my patience far too much."

"That insipid mortal technology show is my work," Tony said, his voice rocketing off. He didn't care if anyone heard them fighting.

"You didn't even know of it until this morning," Loki argued back.

"So?" Tony shouted. Loki had struck a very raw nerve by accident. In his own anger he was failing to notice how vulnerable Tony had become.

"So why is it more important than the plans we had made?" Loki snapped. In order to stop the doors from closing he had to lean across the doorway, making it impossible to cross the space between him and the back of the elevator where Tony had leaned against the wall defiantly.

"Plans?" Tony let out a frustrated huff of air. "We didn't make plans. When I said I had plans for you, I had plans for you, but that could've happened anytime! What makes you think you get to throw a fit about it? You get to spend the rest of whatever with me, but I don't have that time with them." Tony glared up at the ceiling, dying to shout a thousand things at once. "So if I want to go

to a fucking car show and see my company for a couple of hours I think you can handle it. Besides, you were asleep when I got out of the shower this morning and if it was that important to you, you should've waited up! Or come in the shower with me or---" Tony threw his hands up, too angry to look at Loki. He shook his head, grimacing. At the corner of his eye he could feel a tear welling, and he would be damned if he let it fall. He was still sound in his decision, he did want to travel with Loki, but that didn't stop him from feeling like he was being left behind by his friends. He knew rationally that life would go on without him. It was the emotional side of it that was hard to bear, and that coupled with the fight he was having right then was more than he could take on.

"Tony," Loki said. The man refused to look at him. Tony was glaring up at the ceiling, fighting with himself. Loki knew an internal struggle like that far too well to fail recognizing it in someone else, especially Tony.

He stepped into the elevator, allowing the doors to chime closed behind them. Tony's words had come out in a loud, angry torrent, overflowing his restraint. "Tony," Loki said with gentle command. He stepped in close to Tony's tense body, relieved that Tony didn't push him away. His long finger slipped under Tony's chin. The man remained taught and angry. He was too busy fighting himself so that he could remain composed to push Loki away. Instead he glowered, refusing to look. "Tony," Loki purred, tilting Tony's chin up towards him. Tony felt himself being pushed up against the wall as Loki leaned into him. In his stubbornness he hated it, but at the same time it was absolutely wonderful. He wanted to be pushed up against the wall until he melted into it and never looked back. Loki's face was brushing past his cheek and the god was finding his ear to whisper into as he so loved to do.

"I told you this morning how important you were to me," Loki said, lilting somewhere between a purr and a growl. "Should I not desire you then?" He whispered. "Should I not be disappointed that I was denied a day of proving what I'd said to you?" Tony felt one of Loki's hands comb through his hair, and released himself to the comfort it brought. He was listening intently, but he was panicking too, and he needed that reassurance. "Had I known what my morning sleep would've done, I'd never have let you leave." His hot breath was finding its way down Tony's neck, his lips mere millimeters from the skin. Tony closed his eyes.

"Then next time," Tony said, "don't leave me alone. I didn't know what to do with you, Loki."

His dark hair fell back from his face as Loki leaned up away from Tony's neck to raise his green eyes to meet Tony. "I can't do everything on your schedule," Tony said. "I can't wait on you. I'll help you out when you're sick but you there's a line to how much of that I'm willing to do. I'm not going to sit around and wait on you all the time." Loki closed his eyes and pressed his lips to Tony's neck, gently.

"I apologize," Loki said softly.

"And until I leave I'm going to spend more time with the team. I can't---" Tony trailed off. He could feel Loki watching him again, holding him securely against the wall. "I can't leave things how they are with them. There's been a lot of fucked up shit between us and if someone dies in the field while I'm gone I don't want to leave with---"

"Regrets," Loki said.

"Yeah," Tony said. "A lot has changed."

Loki murmured some pensive note of agreement and returned to pressing his lips softly along Tony's neck. Tony closed his eyes, releasing himself into the sensation of hot breath against his skin. His enraged confession and the emotional somersaulting of the day had left him empty and

tired. "Loki," he said quietly. "I want to sleep in my own bed."

Loki leaned back from him, creating a space between them. He did not look down at Tony, but at the floor instead. "Let's go to my floor," Tony said, responding to Loki's doubt.

"Alright," Loki said, leaning in against him again. He reached back and pressed the button for Tony's floor before wrapping his arms around Tony. He could settle for holding Tony. That was enough. He was tired as well and preferred to have Tony when the man was smiling with that careless grin of his. Besides, he could sense that Tony needed this, and remarking on it was unnecessary.

When they arrived at Tony's floor there was some teasing between them as they took off their clothes, but when they were down to their boxers they curled into the sheets and sleep came quickly. Tony was exhausted and out like a light. Loki lingered only a little longer, feeling slightly remorseful that the day had turned out as it had. Still, Tony was there beside him, and in truth, that was all that was important.

Chapter End Notes

I don't think I intended for this fanfic to have as many fights between everyone as it has, but here we are. Hmm what would Tony's regrets/concerns be.

That I Can Believe In

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

It was overcast and gloomy. There was a loud peal of thunder outside. Cumbersome dark gray clouds loomed just beyond the windows, and within seconds of the thunderclap, rain began to pour. Tony awoke to the sound of rain pounding against the glass.

Leaning up in bed, he squinted at the scene outside. The windows in his bedroom were tiny compared to the sweeping wall of windows in Loki's main room. There were only two, with one on either side of the far wall. Loki groaned in the bed beside him, feeling the mattress bounce in Tony's movement.

Tony watched the rain coming down. It zigzagged across the mirrored windows, merging with other drops and then racing down. The city streets below were bleak and gray. He watched a car push through a puddle and send a jettison of water onto the sidewalk.

"Tony," Loki said.

The man turned his head towards Loki. The god grinned in return.

"Sir," Jarvis chirped. "Good morning. There are two messages waiting for you from Steve. There is one from Thor that is awaiting Loki as well." Tony ignored the moan of dismay beside him.

"Go ahead," Tony said.

"Stop," Loki said. "Are they not urgent?"

"Their urgency is low, which is why I waited until you had awoken," Jarvis said.

"Then they can wait," Loki said. He had one hand covering his eyes, rubbing the sleep from them.

Tony moved to get out of the bed, figuring that Loki was only arguing with Jarvis because he wanted to sleep longer. He felt a hand wrap around his wrist.

There was another crash of thunder outside.

Tony turned to study Loki, who was watching him with bright, attentive eyes. "I had rather hoped to amend my mistake," he said, biting down on his bottom lip. He could feel that Tony was tense beside him, uncertain. The man's eyes flickered down to the taut skin of Loki's lips briefly. "I won't let you get away from me this morning, Tony."

Tony felt his breath catch in the back of his throat. He was careful not to let any interest show on his face. The previous day still hung over him. More than anything he was tired, and now last night's fight was coming back to him. He felt slightly ashamed of his outburst now that morning had come, and vaguely upset. "Lie down," Loki whispered.

Tony glanced down at the soft twist of bed sheets and his expectant lover's eyes. He could hear the rain beating against the windowpanes, still.

His back sank into the mattress comfortably. Loki had let go of his wrist, and was sitting up in the bed, thinking. "There's no pop quiz on this," Tony said.

Loki's green eyes glanced back at him. "Shhh," he whispered, leaning down against Tony. The man made to speak again but stopped, quieted by the hot breath slipping into his ear. "Shhh," Loki whispered again, in a steamy, commanding breath that sent shivers sparking down Tony's spine. He had no idea how the god could do that to him with just a whisper, but he wasn't complaining.

He began losing himself in the stroke of those firm hands, slipping down under his shirt and finding themselves along the curves of his ribs and waist. "Mmm," Loki muttered as he buried his face in the crook of Tony's neck, sucking hard at the skin there. Tony's back arched up towards him. He swung his leg comfortably over Tony's hips, holding him down. There was a soft groan as Tony's hands trailed down the dip of his spine. Loki had no patience for clothing today, and had used magic to speed along steps that they usually took their time enjoying.

His hands rubbed down against Tony's thighs, teasing the sensitive skin there. The man was hard and moaning with want each time his hands circled back down, pressing into hipbones as his lips trailed along, teeth grazing against the skin, taunting him.

He felt Tony pull him in, catching hold of his long, thick hair and tugging. He didn't mind. So long as Tony came undone in wanting him. It was not long before his hands gave up teasing Tony and found their way to the man's knees, kneading in gently. He bent down and kissed Tony's stomach. Tony let out a wanting groan, tugging at his hair again.

"Patience," Loki whispered, kissing Tony's stomach again. He took his time spreading Tony's legs apart, listening to the moan it brought, feeling the man's fingers pull him in. He kissed Tony's stomach again, muttering.

"This is the slowest makeup sex I've ever had," Tony said. The words came without criticism. He felt Loki laugh softly.

Tony looked down at the god staring up at him, his face partially obscured by Tony's bare stomach. The god's eyes were devilish again. "Shall I go slower?" He asked.

"Only if you want to owe me more making up," Tony said.

"Hmm," Loki said thoughtfully. They let the banter go a moment later, each letting out a soft moan of desire as Tony shifted in the bed. Tony made a loud groan as Loki pushed into the heat of his body easily, thick and hard. Tony's legs spread wide, and he moaned with each thrust, eager to lose himself in the press of Loki against him.

A drop of sweat rolled down the god's face. His eyes had closed shut. His mouth twitched in a rare moment of uncalculated need. Tony moaned again, his eyes flickering closed for a moment, despite his wanting to watch Loki's face contort with pleasure.

The bed creaked around them. There was another clap of thunder outside as rain continued to beat against the window. Loki pushed the hair back from his face. His hands rubbed back down against Tony's hips, pushing in hard against the hipbones. He thrust hard into Tony, a shout breaking from him. Tony's arms wrapped in around him as he came, shaking. Softly, he pressed his lips to Tony's chest, slowly returning from the high.

He felt a soft rumble of laughter in Tony's chest that was broken by a groan. Loki leaned up to ask, but Tony just grabbed the god's hand in his own and sucked hard at one of the god's wet fingers. He came quickly, Loki watching him somewhere between contentment and curiosity.

"You still owe me," Tony said, leaning back into the pillow.

“I hardly agree,” Loki replied, running his slick fingers through Tony’s hair.

“No, you definitely have some more making up to do,” Tony said. “I’m not convinced.”

“Hmm,” Loki said, rolling over. “Perhaps.”

“Definitely,” Tony said. He smacked Loki’s ass, then laughed loudly at the indignant expression that earned. The god was back over him in seconds, pinning his wrists on either side of his head.

“You shall have your own making up to do,” he growled, trailing his hot tongue down Tony’s neck. The man’s adam’s apple bobbed as he laughed again.

“Make me,” Tony said.

“That I shall,” Loki muttered throatily.

“Sir,” Jarvis interrupted. “Message pending from Bruce.”

Loki sighed, releasing Tony’s wrists. He sat back up disdainfully.

“Can it wait?” Tony asked.

“Yes,” Jarvis said.

“Then let it wait, Jarvis.”

Chapter End Notes

There are still some loose ends to be tied up in this story, but once Quiet Nights ends I'm thinking that I would like to divide Tony and Loki's traveling and future into a separate story collected of 1-2 chapter arcs, prompts/requests, character studies, and so on.

That I Wish I'd Said

Bruce's voice played through Jarvis' recording with hesitancy. "I thought by now you'd told him," Bruce was saying. "So I'm giving you a heads up. Sorry about it. I really thought you'd told him."

Tony did not look thrilled. Not in the least. Loki had watched the happiness in Tony's face peel off with each of Banner's clipped sentences. He'd called Rhodey to arrange a farewell send off for Tony. Rhodey had no idea what had transpired. He did not seem pleased. Loki wasn't sure whether to touch Tony or not.

The second message began to play. It was Thor. "I wish to speak to you. We have much to discuss."

Steve's messages had only been to remind Tony that he needed to move one of his cars in the garage because it was blocking one of the doors and to look over the SHIELD briefing he'd sent earlier. It was nothing remarkable, it was just Steve's way of keeping him involved.

"I've got a phone call to make," Tony said. "You take care of whatever is going on with you and Thor today."

"It is trivial," Loki said, staring up at the ceiling.

"Take care of it," Tony said. Loki watched him get out of bed and head to the shower, his walk tense and agitated. What a shame. He had been so receptive that morning. Loki could still make out some of the pink flushes he'd left on the man's skin.

Tony picked up the phone a while later. Loki had gone back down to his own floor, and Tony hoped, to talk to Thor. He put through the call.

"Yeah?" Came Rhodey's voice from the other line.

"Hey."

"Yeah, hey. That's all you wanted to say?"

Tony could picture Rhodey's face perfectly. He knew that tone well. "Listen," he said. "I didn't exactly tell anyone here either. But here it is."

"I'm your best friend, man. You couldn't have told me at any point in the texts and calls the last few months?"

Tony sighed, rubbing his forehead. "I know, you've just been busy with your super ultra secret White House job and---"

"No excuses," Rhodey said. Tony laughed softly. "And is it true? You're leaving?"

"Yeah," Tony said. "It's true."

"What am I going to do when I need a best man at my wedding? Who's going to throw the bachelor party?"

Tony grinned. Rhodey was reprimanding him, but gently. "I'll be back for that," Tony said. "No

one throws a party better than me. And anyway, you didn't tell me you're getting married."

"I'm not," Rhodey said. "Yet. But I would tell you if I were."

"Point taken," Tony said.

"It better damn well be," Rhodey said. "So when's this farewell party? You're not going anywhere until I say goodbye."

"I don't know," Tony said. "I haven't been planning it."

"Yeah well, they said they were still working out the times. When I fly over there we're going to have some serious catching up, do you understand me?"

"Yeah, got it Mom."

Rhodey scoffed over the phone. "I kind of feel like that right now."

"You've got the passive aggressive part down."

"I wouldn't have to if someone didn't say hey, huge changes in my life, thought I might share."

"Uh-huh."

"Anything else going on with you?"

"No, I think we've covered it," Tony said. "What's going on with you?"

Rhodey's voice trailed off on a long, winding road of code names and "I can't tell you this but..." that Tony found himself missing. He should've said something to Rhodey long ago. Rhodey probably would've worried like the rest at first, but he believed in Tony. Maybe if Tony had told him, he would've made sense of things sooner. Tony found himself laughing along with Rhodey, throwing in snarky comments at the right intervals, and losing himself in the words of his friend as he watched the gray clouds pass outside.

Tony waited until the conversation was coming to a close.

"Hey Rhodey?"

"Yeah?"

"Thanks. And sorry. Thanks and sorry."

Rhodey paused, feeling the weight of the phone in his hand. "Yeah, Tony. Sure thing."

When Tony went to the kitchen for lunch he found that Loki and Steve were already sitting at the table. "You didn't talk, did you," Tony said. He opened the fridge.

"No," Loki replied irritably from the table.

Tony took out a box of leftover pizza, saying nothing. "Loki was telling me about an art gallery in Asgard," Steve said. Tony punched some numbers into the microwave.

“I’ll go move my car in the garage,” Tony said. “Then I’ll come back up.” He glanced at Loki and then headed for the elevator. The god rolled his eyes, frustrated with Tony’s meddling, and turned his attention back to Steve.

“You didn’t talk to Thor, huh,” Steve said.

Loki turned his head, uncertain about how Steve had come that conclusion. “Just talk to him, it’s not a big deal,” Steve said.

Not a big deal? Since when did these mortals think they had the right to advise him? “I’d tell you what it is but Thor wants to tell you himself,” Steve said.

“No,” Steve said, watching those green eyes jump from hostility to curiosity. “He wants to be the one to tell you.” He could see the gears in Loki’s head spinning, weighing the best way to get Steve to spill. “I’d better take Tony’s pizza out of the microwave,” he said, standing up from the table.

Tony saved him from a barrage of winding questions when he returned back up from the garage. Loki pleasantly surprised Tony by saying he was going to speak to Thor, making it look entirely like it was on Tony’s behalf. Steve grinned at that, confusing Tony. “Don’t worry about it,” Steve said as the doors closed behind Loki. He regretted it in the next moment as Tony’s eyes turned on him with the same calculating intrigue as Loki.

“I’m going upstairs,” Steve said.

That Which Can Be Fixed

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Loki was watching him with poorly disguised amusement from the lab desk. Tony had resorted to tinkering with a machine when Steve had gone upstairs. “You’re seriously not going to tell me what you talked about with Thor,” Tony said, popping a bolt loose.

“No,” Loki said, his words faintly muffled by the hand he’d rested his chin on. His eyes followed Tony’s arm as it moved back and forth, working a wrench.

The man made a displeased sound in reply. Loki continued to watch him work for a while.

“We have not discussed our departure in full,” he said.

Tony held the wrench tightly in his hands, considering his reaction. “Okay,” he said, not looking away from the machine. Footsteps echoed across the lab as Loki walked in closer to him. He stooped down next to the man, his black robe brushing against Tony’s feet.

“Tony,” he said, setting his hand on the wrench in the man’s hands. Tony gave it up to him, but not without making Loki pry it from his grip. Loki yanked at the wrench until it gave, sending his arm flying back a little. Tony looked at the wrench in Loki’s hands. “I wish to leave soon,” he said, reaching out and brushing his hand through Tony’s hair. “The time of your friends’ celebration is near.”

Tony let Loki comb his fingers through his hair but gazed at the lab around him. He was already mourning his goodbyes. “When?”

Loki tilted the man’s head in his hands as he had so many times before. “Perhaps,” he said, “by the week’s end.”

The longer Tony put it off, the harder it would become. “What are we going to tell them when they ask about me coming back?”

Loki pretended to consider the question. “Nothing,” he said.

Tony’s face fell rigid. “That is not the right answer.”

Loki just smirked to himself, tilting his head. “It may be the truth.”

“No,” Tony said. “I promised I’d be back for Avengers missions and holidays and---“ He sighed heavily. “I have to give them something concrete.”

“Fine,” Loki said. “The next Midgardian holiday is New Year, is it not? Give them that.”

“That’s a long way off,” Tony said.

Loki’s patience was growing thin. He had waited months for Tony, and the last thing he wanted to do was to discuss them coming back. He twisted runes across his fingertips then, letting them spark in green and blue. They drifted up and away like fireflies, shining brightly before sparking out.

“Show off,” Tony said. Loki grinned. He’d seen Tony watching the sparks drift away.

“Nothing in comparison to what we’ll be seeing,” he said.

“I should call upstairs and see if they set a date for the sendoff,” Tony said. He paused, remembering something. “Didn’t Thor say he wanted to take everyone out for drinks? Before you got sick?”

“I’ll ascertain the time of our farewell,” Loki said, ignoring Tony’s redirect. He loathed being in the lab. It reminded him of Tony’s frailty, Tony’s occasional reclusion, and he would be glad to leave it permanently.

“What,” Tony said, “You afraid that you can’t party at the level of someone like me? Do you prefer to keep things low-key?”

Loki was over him in a heartbeat. “I find your insistence upon infantile puns boring,” he hissed. “As for my partying, I have a good thousand years on you.”

“Dude,” Tony said.

Loki leaned back onto the floor. He was about to correct Tony’s use of a word like “dude” when Jarvis cut in. It was Natasha.

“Tony?”

“Yeah?”

“I’m sure you’re aware,” Natasha said, “that we’ve been planning a farewell for you?”

“Uh-huh,” Tony replied.

“We kinda need an okay on some dates so that we can arrange a time.”

“The end of the week,” Loki said.

Natasha was quiet for a moment. She hadn’t seemed to be aware of Loki’s presence. “Tony?”

“End of the week,” Tony said.

The line went silent for a minute. “This Friday at eight?”

“Okay,” Tony said. He felt sounder now that there was a concrete date on it.

“I’ll call you back in a minute,” Natasha said. She disconnected from Jarvis before Tony could reply.

Loki picked up the wrench from the floor where he’d set it. Tony saw a flicker of magic slip down across the metal. “Hey! That’s expensive.”

Loki glanced up at him and back down at the wrench. Another pulse of magic flickered across. “What are you doing, Loki? Put that down. Seriously? I’m going to kick you out of the lab.”

“As if you could,” Loki muttered. “I’m not hurting it.”

“Hand it over,” Tony said.

“Hey,” Natasha’s voice said over the lab speaker system.

“Miss me?” Tony asked.

“Uh-huh,” she said, humoring him. “Actually, I wanted to talk to Loki.”

Tony snagged the wrench from Loki’s hand as his attention was redirected towards Natasha.
“Yes?”

“I’d rather speak in person,” she said. “Could you come up here?” He glanced at Tony before answering. The man had shook his head unknowingly, intrigued. Loki vanished from him in the next instant, finding himself in one of the conference rooms.

Natasha leaned off of the desk she’d been standing against.

“Agent Romanov,” Loki said. “I hope you didn’t call on me to entertain another one of your threats.”

“No,” Natasha said, smiling confidently. “I don’t need to threaten twice.”

Loki grinned in acknowledgement. He took a seat in one of the conference chairs, pressing his fingertips together.

“I brought you here because I have a plan.”

She sat back down on top of the conference room table, bracing her arms against it. “How is Tony handling the situation with Barton?”

It was a question that Loki had not anticipated. “I have not heard anything on the matter.”

Natasha nodded her head, frowning at the ceiling. “I wish I could say the same.”

“I feel I have made all the necessary amends to Barton. I grow tired of these games.”

“I don’t entirely care for them either,” Natasha said, tilting her head towards Loki with exasperation. She leaned back against her arms. “Though, I think there’s a way to get Barton and Tony on good terms again.”

Loki was listening intently.

In truth, Tony had given up on Clint. Tony was angry, but he saw no way to change things with Clint, and he was putting his own happiness first. Let Clint act out. Tony wasn’t going to cater to that. He probably would’ve fought the archer if he’d had the time.

“The way I’m choosing to look at it,” Natasha said, “is that you and I are both affected by Tony and Clint. Which should make us allies.”

“Go on.”

“And if we give Clint and Tony a common enemy, they may have a common ally.”

He grinned, following her train of thought.

“Besides,” she said. “I want Tony to leave on good terms with the whole team, and it always benefits me to have Barton in a better place. So.”

“I’m well aware,” Loki said, eager to hear her plan. “You have my allegiance. So let us plot.”

Natasha nodded, a thin smile tucking up into her lips.

Tony had lost track of time before Loki returned. He'd moved on to working on another machine. The god walked over and sat beside him as before. "What'd she want?" Tony asked.

"Just Project X," Loki said, folding one secret inside of another.

Tony turned back to the machine, dejected. He'd tried everything he could to get Loki to tell him what that was about. Loki would only remind the man that he was the god of lies, and he shouldn't believe anything that he said anyway.

"The hour of dinner approaches," Loki said, glancing down at Tony. "I wish to dine outside of this tower."

"Dinner time, got it," Tony said. "Hand me that wrench you were screwing with earlier." Loki sighed loudly, melodramatically, beside him before getting up. Tony grinned to himself. He didn't need the wrench. He just liked asking Loki to get it.

A few seconds later the wrench clinked on the ground beside his foot where he was standing up. "Stark, surely this machine can wait."

"So can you," Tony said, smirking.

"Can I?" Loki whispered, pulling Tony in from behind.

"Cheater," Tony said.

"Mhmm," Loki replied.

Chapter End Notes

I'm anticipating that the next chapter will be rather large, as it's the farewell party, so hang in there!

I'm curious about what you're hoping will happen. :)

That I Hope You Farewell.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“Is it nerves about the party, because that can be fixed,” Tony said, bracing his hands on either side of Loki’s neck, kneading his fingers down into those tense shoulders. Loki had been distracted ever since Tony had initiated things that morning. Receptive, but distracted. At first Tony had let it go, but it became too frustrating to ignore. Loki kept looking away and getting lost in his own mind. “You know that it can,” Tony murmured, trailing his lips down Loki’s bare throat.

“What have I to fear,” Loki said, not amused. He was insulted that Tony thought he’d have a fit of nerves over a party. Tony stopped kneading his shoulders. The man’s steady eyes met his with determination.

“You wanna tell me what it is?”

“Nothing.”

“Right,” Tony said, sitting back from Loki. The god stared up at him from the pillow where he lay.

“Stark,” Loki said with an exasperated sigh. He grabbed the back of Tony’s neck, pulling him in close again, gracelessly pushing his lips against the man’s and working his tongue in. Tony moaned, returning this kiss eagerly.

“Seriously though,” Tony said, pulling back. Loki’s eyes snapped open.

“Nothing is the matter,” Loki said, pushing Tony away from him so that it was Tony’s back against the mattress. “Aside from you of course,” he said, his sharp eyes watching Tony as his tongue found its way along Tony’s collarbone.

“Hmm,” Tony said. “Well, that can be fixed,” he said, abandoning his concern and diving headfirst back into lust. “Why don’t you fix it?” He grinned. And although it was Loki’s favorite grin, it didn’t work the way it usually did. He did not have the time for it this morning.

“Gladly,” Loki said, running his thumbs down Tony’s hipbones. The man’s breath hitched loudly in his throat, and Loki almost, *almost*, felt bad about it. Tony wanted him so desperately, and while he wasn’t about to turn that down, the timing hadn’t exactly been convenient. Loki played on all of Tony’s weaknesses swiftly, collecting needy moans and sighs with each twist of his tongue. He smirked out of pride. Of course he could make Tony come undone easily.

“Okay,” Tony said. He grabbed one of Loki’s teasing hands.

“Okay what,” Loki said, whispering down against his ear.

“You know what,” Tony said, roughly brushing his hand down Loki’s face, hooking his thumb over the god’s chin and tilting it down. Loki had that infuriating, cocky smirk, a smirk that Tony felt only he should wear, but he forgot that a moment later as the god shoved into the heat of him, displacing all the thoughts in his mind. Tony sighed loudly, tilting his head back as Loki set the pace, faster and faster.

With his eyes closed, he didn’t see Loki steal a sideways glance at the clock, the god’s lucid green eyes slipping from his flushed face towards the digital display. He looked back down at Tony, his

face abandoned in pleasure as Loki rocked his hips, watching him. Another glance at the clock. He reached down, stroking the man's exposed cock, pulling a tormented cry from the man. His hand was sticky a moment later. "Loki," Tony said absently, collapsing against the mattress. The god allowed himself to come.

He leaned down, pressing a quick parting kiss to Tony's chest. "Get ready for the day," he said.

"Uh-huh," Tony said, eyes closed. He had no intention of doing so.

"I mean it," Loki said, sitting away from him. "Go shower."

Tony grinned playfully, his eyes still closed. "You know I'm never going to turn down one in the shower, but give me a moment, would you, we're not all demigods."

"Now," Loki demanded.

"Okay, okay," Tony said, sitting up. He pulled himself up, getting out of the bed. A few feet from the bed he turned, realizing that Loki was not following him.

"Stark," he said, pointing towards the shower. Tony didn't move. "I wish to visit your Midgardian city in the time we have left today, please, move quickly."

Tony walked playfully back to him, dropping his arms around the god's shoulders. "I might move a little faster if you came along." He grinned.

Loki frowned irritably. As much as he wanted to take the offer, he was all too aware of the clock. "Surprise me in how fast you ready yourself and I might make it up to you," Loki said, begrudgingly resorting to a bribe.

"Alright," Tony said, all too good at recognizing when things would work in his favor. The bathroom door slammed shut behind him, the shower turning on not a moment later. Though Tony was a little disappointed, he decided that the god's erratic behavior was all to be blamed on the farewell party that evening and let it go. His own worries about the party were more than happy to consume him.

Loki shook his head, slightly amused, before vanishing to his own floor. In minutes he was dressed and ready. They had only ten minutes until their plan began. He popped back over onto Tony's floor to find the man getting dressed. "I'll be in the lobby," he said, ignoring Tony's playful grin. Loki vanished, but Tony laughed, having felt something decidedly magic-made slap him on the ass before the god disappeared completely. Pulling his shirt over his head, he began walking for the elevator.

"I sent Steve and Thor out party supply shopping. Bruce won't be back until the evening as usual," Natasha confirmed. "I traced Clint's cell phone and he's on route back here from his meeting. Three minutes."

"Good," Loki said. Natasha was sitting against a marble planter of an ornamental shrub. Their voices echoed softly across the large, vacant lobby. "Remember," he said, pausing, allowing his voice to wander across the word. "Follow me."

"I've got it," Natasha said with boredom. "Where's Tony?"

Loki glanced anxiously back towards the elevator doors. He knew that the man would come quickly. Tony would be all too eager to have the god in his debt. Still, there was little time remaining if things were going to move perfectly on schedule.

Just as he began to consider prompting the man again he heard the automatic doors slide open behind them.

“Hey---“ Tony’s boisterous, animated voice returned down to earth when he noticed Natasha sitting in the same room. “You’re having a party without me?” He recovered, pretending to be hurt.

“Yes,” they both said flatly.

“Don’t mind me then,” Tony said, digging in his pocket for a set of car keys. “Let’s go,” he said, nodding towards Loki. The trickster’s attention was pointed elsewhere, on the lobby doors.

Clint was walking in, his shoulders held high, as he had already spotted everyone in the room. Tersely, he walked up to the group, saying to Natasha, “our lunch party just got bigger?” He was trying his best for Tony, he really was. It wasn’t Tony’s fault that Loki made his skin crawl, or sent him doubling back into the memories of New York, still as vivid as they’d ever been. “We can take my car.”

Natasha glanced cautiously towards Loki, waiting to see what his move would be. Clint’s receptiveness had been considered a more unlikely possibility. Loki seemed to think it would play out in their favor. He was watching Tony, letting the man respond.

“Yeah,” Tony said. “I think we could do that,” he said, glancing over at Loki for confirmation.

The group went silent before Loki could answer. They had just heard a deep, rumbling growl, followed by a distinct skittering sound. “Be still,” Loki said, assuming command. He stepped in front of the group, measuring his footsteps cautiously towards the sound. The walls shuddered as another growl rattled through the building.

“Sir,” Jarvis chirped. “There is an unknown life form within the building. Shall I call authorities or dispatch the Iron Man suit?”

“The suit,” Tony said without thinking.

Loki had walked about twenty feet away from them, as though lured by the sound. With his back to them they were all looking to one another, eager to form a plan but cautious to leap in without knowing. “Clint,” Natasha said quietly, “you have a bow on the floor above us, right? You should go get it.”

“And leave you?” He said quickly.

“Clint,” she said. “You’re better with a bow and we both know it. You’d better be armed, so go upstairs and get it.” Clint stared at her with resistance for only a heartbeat before caving in, heading briskly for the stairs. Tony’s Iron Man suit soared past him as he ran through the lobby doors connecting to the inner part of the tower. Clint’s hurried figure disappeared past the wall of glass into the small inside room, where he threw open one of the doors beside the elevator.

Metal clanked together loudly beside Natasha as the suit enveloped Tony. “Any idea what we’re dealing with?” He called to Loki.

“Something from the outer realms,” Loki said, not straining his voice or shouting. “Undoubtedly something that attached itself to Thor unwittingly when he returned. Something that’s been waiting for an opportunity.”

“And how do we kill it?”

“Carefully.”

Clint returned, a quiver of arrows slung over his back and a bow in hand. He handed Natasha a handgun, though he knew she’d already have several hidden on her. Silently she took it from him.

A howl shattered the hushed lobby, breaking a crescendo of glass in its wake as it flew through the air, striking fear into the two hearts that had not planned its coming. Still invisible, the form responsible for the sound broke into the room from a wall, skittering loudly like an insect. Several of the fluorescent lobby lights burst out, draping the room in patches of darkness.

As Tony and Clint scanned the room frantically for the thing responsible, they could only watch in horror at the front door caved in, blocking their exit. Behind them they were met with the sound of the inner doors crumbling, effectively cornering them.

“Wait,” Clint said, calling out to Natasha from behind his tautly pulled bow.

“I’m not going to sit here and wait,” she said, walking out from the group. Taking aim, she fired a round of shots towards the wall, spacing each of them evenly across a line. In the fifth gunshot she made contact.

A spiny, harrowing creature with tight, leathery skin and sunken, dark eyes cried out, its illusion broken. Turning towards them, it lunged, its centipede-like legs moving at an unnatural speed. “Clint,” Natasha called back, firing rapidly, “lodge an arrow in it so we can track it before it disappears!”

An arrow whisked past her, over her shoulder, landing soundly against its target just a few feet away. “I’m going in,” she heard Tony say behind them.

“Aim for the eyes!” Loki called out to him, quickening his pace towards the group. Tony launched past him, boosters flaring, their sound ricocheting off the damaged walls.

“Hawkeye,” Loki said, joining him and Natasha. “Line your arrows along its back, aiming for the spine.”

“Can’t you just magic this thing away?” Clint said coldly, aiming an arrow at its spine anyway.

“Magic can’t solve everything,” Loki said, calculating the distance between Clint and Natasha. It wasn’t enough. The arrow made contact with the creature’s back, but did not sink in. Tony’s shots were ineffective, but he was limited by what he could do in the contained nature of the lobby and the risk of ricocheting missiles and beams. “Get closer,” Loki said.

Clint grimaced angrily, but took the steps forward anyway. This time his arrow made contact and cut into the creature’s flesh, resulting in another loud howl. He watched as Loki ran in front of him, not fazed by the jettison of arrows now aimed in the proximity of his back. Frustrated, Clint aimed his arrows with precision, leaving a wider arc between their targets and the god.

He was attempting to aid Tony, but it was obvious to Clint that Loki’s magic was unsuited for whatever sort of combat this was. The green sparks made little to no impact on the creature, and he was leaving himself vulnerable to strikes from the creature. He yelled out to Tony and the man ignored him, stubbornly attempting to strike a blast into one of the impacted arrows. It was effective, drawing another howl from the creature.

The creature’s jaw spread wide, unhinging a fast, muscular black tongue that plucked Tony out of the air and tossed him aside. The man landed easily, his feet bracing against the ground as he slid to a halt. Certain that the creature was redirecting its focus on Loki, Clint aimed another arrow just

as the tongue verged in a different direction, taking him by surprise and shooting straight past him.

Twisting around in horror, he saw Natasha plucked from behind him, still rapidly firing shots into the creature as its tongue coiled around her. The creature wasted no time in slinging her back, slamming her through the inoperable glass doors leading into the small inner room. Going numb, he watched as her lifeless body was dropped, falling to the floor stiffly as the creature's tongue retracted itself. All went silent as he turned deaf to the life around him, his entire consciousness focused on her. He'd have to break through the glass to reach her, and doing so would leave them all open and vulnerable to the creature. His arrows were the most effective attack they had, and if he left to attend her he'd jeopardize everything.

Loki was reading him closely, estimating just how disturbed the archer was. If he believed Natasha dead he could tailspin out of control. If he believed her savable, his motivation would go as planned. Loki heard Tony's suit flaring up behind him for another round. The inventor had focused in on the creature's predetermined weakness slightly faster than Loki had hoped for.

Clint seemed to have decided to fight with determination, not abandon. He had hope then. Loki maneuvered a bit further from the creature, slipping from Clint's eyesight. "It's venomous," Loki called out to them. "Coming into contact with its tongue paralyzes you and causes loss of consciousness."

"I say that for your benefit," he told Clint, standing closer behind the man now. "It has no effect on Tony's suit."

"Yeah?" Clint said, pulling another arrow from his quiver. He was running low and recovering his arrows from the creature wasn't an option. He fired again.

"Here," he heard Loki say beside him. There was a handful of arrows in his palm. Wordlessly, Clint took them. "The spine," Loki repeated.

"Got it," Clint said. Tony had just fired another blast against one of the arrows that pulsated down into the creature. It wasn't wonderfully effective, but it worked, and they were chipping away at the creature bit by bit.

In another howl the creature's tongue lashed out, and Clint dodged it effortlessly. With a sickening churn of his stomach he heard the tongue make contact with something behind him.

Knocking Loki to the ground, the creature flung him into the glass doors with far less grace than it had done with Natasha. He slammed into the room where Natasha lay, rolling haplessly along the floor until he made contact with the back wall.

"Tony!" Clint screamed, desperate to break through the panic he knew was sweeping Tony. "He's just stunned!"

"We have to take this thing down together!"

Tony's suit turned towards him, listening. "I'll keep shooting along its spine, you aim for the places where the arrow strikes, got it?!" Clint yelled to him.

"Got it," Tony yelled down.

For the first time since they'd begun Clint and Tony lined up their attacks in perfect tandem, striking with absolute precision. Several times the creature lashed out, its tongue striking Tony, but the suit protected him from the threat and he made an extra effort to extend that protection to Clint.

“Not bad,” Natasha said from upstairs.

Loki and she were watching the fight unfold from the security feed in the common room’s mega screen. Their doubles still laid incapacitated on the floor of the lobby, comfortably out of reach from Tony and Clint but within sight.

“Yes,” Loki agreed, “But how they end the battle will really determine the outcome.”

“I still think you made my hair a bit too red,” Natasha said.

“That’s how I see it,” Loki said.

“Hmm,” Natasha said. “I think you made yourself a bit taller,” she prodded him, grinning mischievously.

“Not at all,” Loki replied smugly.

The creature’s movements were growing slower now as it circled the room, closing in on them.

“Aim for the base of the spine!” Tony called down to Clint. An arrow met its mark as soon as the words had left his lips. Tony fired into the wound, applying extra strength from the modified suit. He’d never taken his remade Iron Man suit into the field, and it worked like a charm.

The creature’s back legs collapsed, its lower body falling to the floor. Tony blasted the tongue as it darted out, deflecting the blow from Clint. “The forehead!” Clint yelled.

There was another low, rumbling reverberation of sound as the arrow and laser made contact, incapacitating the creature. Clint waited as Tony scanned the body. “No signs of life,” he called down. His faceplate lifted up and away as he landed beside Clint. “Nice,” he said.

“Not bad yourself,” Clint said. His eyes were already wandering toward Natasha as he said it. Together they ran for the doors. Tony cut away the glass quickly, breaking away the broken doors and tossing the useless spires of twisted metal against the ground.

Clint’s hand went straight to Natasha’s wrist, then her neck, as he softly tucked her fingers into his palm. There was a pulse and she was breathing.

“Hey, okay, okay,” he heard Tony mutter a few feet away from him, rolling Loki onto his back.

“Vitals in tact,” he overheard Jarvis say from within Tony’s suit. “State unconscious. Estimated recovery time unknown.”

“Come on,” Clint said. “We’ll take them down to the lab and call Bruce.”

“He said it was just a poison,” Clint said. “Didn’t you hear him? They’re just stunned,” he said softly. Tony was taking this harder than he was, and the realization was making Clint uncomfortable. “Tony?”

“Yeah,” Tony said. His face was turned from Clint, and though his voice was trained and level, there was no mistaking the upset that rippled through every part of Tony that he was not concentrating on controlling. “I must’ve not been listening when he said that. The common room might be better than the lab actually,” Tony said, pretending to be upbeat. “There’s nowhere to lay them down in the lab and the common room has pull out couches.”

“I never realized that,” Clint said.

“Yeah. Imported,” Tony said, scooping Loki off the floor. He was relieved to have the added strength of the suit. “I already put in a call to Bruce when Natasha was hit. He’s on his way, caught in midtown traffic. It’ll probably be an hour. I had sort of been banking on Loki healing Natasha.”

“Maybe they’ll be up before then,” Clint suggested hopefully. He hoped it wasn’t too soon though, because Natasha wouldn’t enjoy being carried around by him like a doll. Poison or no poison, he’d probably get a quick warning jab to the shoulder.

They rode the elevator silently together, with Clint growing more and more awkward as the adrenaline began kicking out. A thought was clawing at the corner of his mind, begging to be let in like a cat scratching at a door.

Tony set Loki down in a chair so that he could pull out the beds from the couches, and as Clint set down Natasha so that he could help, he was captured by the sight of Loki’s limp body. His head had tilted back against the couch, exposing his neck and cracking his lips just perceptively open. It was the first time since seeing him that Clint had not felt a recoil of fear and dread that he then had to gulp down and disguise. Like this, Loki looked peaceful, and, almost, human.

“We’re gonna need sheets from upstairs,” Tony said, not noticing. “I’ll get ‘em, I know right where they are.”

“Okay,” Clint said.

Actually, Clint thought, standing closer, Loki didn’t look at all like the god that had crawled into his mind and sipped on his fears, playing him like a flute in the perfect orchestra against himself and everyone else. This Loki was...still calculating, intelligent, precise, but he was also...Clint tilted his head. He found it difficult to make Loki intimidating when the god was so hopelessly before him, his limbs hanging limply out from the chair. He felt that thought crying to be let in again.

“Alright,” Tony said, walking in with a bundle of sheets in his arms. He tossed a fluffy mess at Clint. “Get to work.”

Clint had the bed dressed with military precision, and took the interval to fix the rumpled mess that Tony was creating. When Natasha and Loki had been safely laid out on the beds they stepped back, still hovering close but perching on the arms of the chairs at the bedside. “I think I need a beer,” Clint said. “Want one?”

“No,” Tony said, his eyes on the bed. Clint stopped.

“You sure you’re okay?”

“Okay enough,” Tony said. He wasn’t about to explain to Clint. The archer sat back down. For a while they sat in silence, Clint anxiously crossing and uncrossing his arms while Tony remained still.

“Hey,” he said, fidgeting with the quiver’s buckle on his chest. Tony’s armor had been neatly stacked in the corner but his shirt was drenched in sweat and his hair was pressed in the places the helmet had been. “About this whole thing,” Clint said. Tony was listening but not moving. “Listen. Everything’s been kinda fucked up and I’m sorry.”

“Yeah,” Tony said noncommittally. Clint couldn’t discern whether it was because Tony was angry or didn’t believe him.

“I, uh,” the words churned from him agonizingly slow. “I’ve had a hard time accepting this,” he

said. The words hung out in the air from him. He sensed that Tony had turned his head to look at him but acknowledging Tony now would only make it more difficult. “Tony, it’s hard for me to be around him and not start reacting to New York.” A breath shuddered into him. “But I’m fuckin’ sorry for the way things are shitty.”

“It’s alright,” Tony said. He didn’t say it too kindly, or too dismissively. “I know.” Tony shifted his seating on the arm of the chair uncomfortably. “You’re not the only one that’s been shitty about this.”

“But I’ve been the worst,” said Clint.

“Maybe,” Tony said, smiling wryly. “If you want to make a competition out of it.”

“But, you know, I’m not handing out prizes for it,” Tony said. Clint sighed, smiling a little bit.

“I haven’t earned the answer to this, but I just wanna know for me, Tony,” Clint said. “You trust him?”

For a moment Tony wanted to shout at him. To let every word he’d held back out in one stampede of fury. How could Clint be questioning him, still? He pinched the bridge of his nose, reigning it in. He wasn’t going to start yelling when Loki and Natasha were lying there.

“I know about the hospital fire,” Tony said. The words came tensely, tiredly. “And Draykov’s daughter. And Sao Paulo. Do you still trust her?”

Clint leaned forward, nodding. Tony had struck home and he knew it. “Yeah,” he said.

“Alright then,” Tony said.

“I’m really fuckin’ sorry,” Clint said somberly. Tony didn’t say anything. “Bad first impression I guess.”

“Yeah,” Tony said. “Well, him screaming at everyone to kneel and throwing me out a window didn’t exactly make the best one either. He’s not good at first impressions.” Tony paused. “Don’t tell him I told you that.”

“I won’t,” Clint said honestly. “He really saved my ass today,” he admitted. “Don’t tell him I told you that.”

“I won’t,” Tony said, though it might have been a lie.

For the first time in months, a regular conversation formed between them. Clint began telling Tony about the training he’d been doing for SHIELD, asking questions about where Tony had been, and listening. In the bed Loki’s eyes flinched. He wished that he had let their doubles stand in for this part, as the conversation had turned mundane and he had nothing to do but lay there and listen to it. Still, it was nice to hear Tony happy, and he knew that he needed to wait. Besides, if they’d used the doubles for this part, Clint or Tony might’ve recognized something a little off about them. Tony especially. He’d notice. Somehow. Maybe Natasha had been right. Maybe he had embellished their body doubles just a little.

Loki chose to wake up when Jarvis announced that Bruce had entered the building. Or rather, tried to enter the building. The lobby doors were crushed after all. Jarvis announced that Bruce was having some difficulty coming in.

“I’ll take care of it,” Loki said, pretending to wake up.

“Stay in bed,” Tony demanded. “There are other entrances into the building.” Hearing Loki’s voice, Natasha pretended to wake.

“Tony, I am well,” Loki said, getting out of the bed. “I see you took care of that creature in the lobby?” He asked, stretching his back.

“Yeah, and you were just on your ass for an hour so get back in that bed,” Tony demanded.

“Just let Bruce check,” Clint said to Loki, taking Tony’s side gently.

“We’re fine,” Natasha said, tossing the bed sheets aside. She had found the hour even more boring than Loki had.

“No,” Clint said.

They were still arguing when Bruce walked into the room. The panic in him had vanished the moment that he’d heard them all fighting. “I don’t even need to check,” he announced, walking into the room. “They’re fine.”

Tony and Clint began arguing with him instead.

For the first time, Natasha and Loki grinned slyly at one another in congratulations.

“I am going to amend the lobby,” Loki said, vanishing before Tony could argue. The creature he’d created was still lying there, and he needed to get rid of it before Thor came back. His brother might recognize it as one of Loki’s own inventions. He also took care to repair the lobby, though it was probably only because he didn’t want to hear Tony whine about fixing it.

It was an hour before Steve and Thor returned, and by that time the story of the morning battle was just that, a story. Thor was awfully disappointed that he had missed out on the action, and Steve was irked that they had not called for backup, though he was trying to control himself. He didn’t want any discord when there was a party that evening.

“Alright,” Steve said eventually. “We need to get the common room ready, so Tony, Loki, go have dinner somewhere and be back here at seven. Does that work for everyone?”

There were murmurs of agreement. It was enough time for Tony, Clint, and Natasha to wash away the dust of battle and for the party to be prepared.

“And,” Steve called after Tony and Loki, “No peeking in. Got it?”

“Sure,” Tony said, assured that Loki wouldn’t bend the rules for him. Tony knew from the tiny smirk at the corner of Loki’s lips that he wouldn’t share.

First, they went to Tony’s floor, because whether Tony liked to admit it or not, he was as sore as hell from fighting and outside his usual fitness for the suit. He drew a bath and tossed his sweaty clothes on the floor. Stepping into the water, he sunk down into the steaming tub and closed his eyes just above the water line.

Loki came in a while later and sat, casually dressed, on the edge of the tub.

“I bet you’re a bit more impressed with the suit now, aren’t you?” Tony asked, cracking a grin. Loki indulged him.

“It is...acceptable.”

“So saving your ass was acceptable, huh?” He smirked up at Loki, whose dark green eyes were watching him from the tub’s edge. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

“You know,” Tony continued, “I guess that really puts you in my debt, with this morning too,” he said. “How will you make it up to me?”

“How indeed,” Loki said.

Tony sensed that he was being sarcastic.

“I guess we’ll have to put city exploring off until another time,” Tony said. “Where’d you wanna go today anyways?”

Loki shrugged, watching water condense on the mirror. “I suppose I didn’t want to stay inside today, waiting for the evening festivities.” He reached over and combed his fingers into Tony’s wet hair, quieting him. Tony closed his eyes, content with the fingers massaging into his scalp. He was exhausted.

There was nothing but the sound of water dripping slowly into the tub, rippling across the still water as Tony soaked, letting Loki run his fingers through his hair. Steam had completely obscured the mirror, and the air was heavy with humidity. It was a long time before Tony suggested that they get up and get ready. There was little time left before the party, and for once, he did not want to be late. Loki did not argue with him, but agreed in a quiet hum before standing up.

The common room was bright and lovely from the moment they walked in. It had Steve’s artistic eye and Pepper’s clean arrangement to it, decorated welcomingly but not too formally. Loki walked in a little behind Tony, approving of the change.

Rhodey and Pepper were the only two non-Avengers present. They’d decided to keep things small and informal. Rhodey brought Tony in for a hug the moment he saw him and began lecturing him a second later, all in good nature. A lively chatter swept across the room, champagne was passed out, and before long they had all settled into their various conversations as if it were an ordinary evening.

Thor came over to where Loki was sitting and began by talking about something that had happened in their childhood, years ago. Something about a raid on the kitchens of Asgard that Loki tuned in and out of as he sipped his champagne. He noticed that Pepper was wearing the pendant he’d given her and felt some mild pleasure at that. He was glad that she liked what he had chosen.

“You will of course come back,” Thor was saying. He was hopeful. No matter the intention, he had been glad to have Loki close to him the last few months.

“We intend to return on New Year,” Loki said. “I think Tony may have made some mention of that.”

“You are welcome back anytime,” Thor reminded him. He was proud of his brother, and Loki could sense it, and was fighting with himself over whether he wanted to accept that. “It will do him well.”

“He will be well,” Loki said. “He is capable.”

“I have no doubt of that,” Thor said. “But it does us all well to visit one another from time to time.”

Loki took another sip of champagne. Thor's hints were far too obtuse for his taste.

Steve sat down with them. "Tony said I should ask you about getting some postcards," Steve said, smiling. "If you think you can manage mailing them across worlds."

"I am not familiar with postcards," Loki said.

"No?" Thor asked. "They are like this," he said, creating a rectangular shape with his hands, "and have photographs of a location."

Steve laughed at Loki's expression. "It's okay," he said.

"I can manage it," Loki said.

Thor and Steve looked at each other knowingly. They wouldn't wound his pride. "Great," Steve said. He allowed the conversation to veer comfortably elsewhere.

It was late in the evening when the sound of a glass being tapped silenced the room. "I think it's time," Pepper said, holding up her champagne. Around the room, glasses raised.

"To Loki and Tony," Thor said.

The phrase echoed around the room.

Tony could hear the champagne as it sank into his throat. The longer he stayed at this party, the sicker he became with the anxiety of leaving. He noticed Steve standing up with a small blue box in his hands. Loki came over and stood beside Tony.

"This is from all of us," Steve said.

"That's Project X," Bruce clarified. He knew that Tony had been wondering. The inventor glanced at him before taking the box from Steve.

Tony opened it. The lid came off with a soft pop, and inside, in the soft curl of cobalt blue fabric laid a gold bracelet, not unlike the ones Tony had popped onto his wrists to summon his suit on the first call of the Avengers.

Lifting it from the box, he saw a distinctive glimmer of magic. Loki's hand reached over and took the box from him, and as he did so, Tony saw that he had the same bracelet on his wrist.

Tony looked up at him, the coy look in his eye, and then the small gathering of faces around him. Everyone was holding up their wrists, showing the bracelets.

"They're communicators," Steve said. "When you want to reach one of us," he said, pressing his pointer finger to the metal, "you think of that person." Tony put his bracelet on. There was a flicker of a pulse through the bracelet that reminded him distinctly of Steve. "They're all connected, so they'll resonate wherever they are."

"Language can't be transmitted, but it's a way of knowing that someone needs to speak to you," Bruce said. "If we all call, you'll know there's a mission."

"Or we just want to see you," Steve said.

Tony tried very, very hard not to give in to the quickening heartbeat, the flood of sentiment that was singing in his veins. "It was Thor's idea but Loki's magic made it possible," Pepper said.

“You’re going to choke me up at our own fucking farewell,” Tony said. “You sappy bunch of bastards.”

“They’re just like cell phones, don’t give yourself a heart attack Stark,” Natasha said.

“Just think of them as more advanced technology than yours,” Clint said, grinning.

“Well that’s just impossible,” Tony said, grinning back. He looked across the room at them, wanting to remember them all in this moment. Happy, united, seemingly untouched by the months of conflict between them. He felt Loki’s hand rest heavily on his shoulder.

That hand that had worked so hard to be the one that Tony loved. That had, in his own clever, though admittedly occasionally manipulative way, worked to be a part of the life that Tony held close. To be accepted, however begrudgingly by the people Tony loved, for no reason other than to do it for Tony. They had both given up things for the sake of something greater.

“We also have something for you,” Natasha said, stepping forward for Loki. Intrigued, Tony was doubly impressed that they had managed to keep two secrets from him. She reached out her hand towards him, holding a heavy paper bag made of bright green, overflowing with gold tissue paper.

He took the bag from her, riffling down past the paper and pulling out a small stuffed animal. He began laughing, and Tony just about fell over himself trying to see what had made the god laugh so. In his hands was a sickeningly cute ram doll with a golden helmet on its head in place of horns, in a perfect replica of Loki’s helmet. “Admittedly no one here is as good at presents as you are,” Natasha said, “but---“ she shrugged, smiling.

“Thank you,” he said. Loki understood it in the way it had been meant---a way of communicating, that at the core, they no longer felt him their adversary but someone that had crossed the bridge into a place where they could joke with one another and be understood. There was no mockery that came with the figure. Its softness whispered something of transformation, and he warmly accepted an object that under any other circumstance would’ve been torn to pieces. Somehow, to him, it seemed to be something so like themselves.

The mood of the room dimmed as they all came to realize that the time to depart had come. There was uncomfortable shuffling, the delay of a goodbye that they did not wish, the last hope of holding onto a moment that promised certainty when everything that laid ahead was unknown. Loki took Tony’s hand in his own.

Words would mar their farewell, and no one ventured to try otherwise. Somberly, tired, parting smiles flickered across their faces as Tony felt Loki’s magic sweep through him, preparing for their departure. He struggled to capture their faces, to remember them all this way. He didn’t give a damn if it was sappy, he just wanted to give himself permission to feel all of it. The joy of being with someone he loved, the gift of having friends to say goodbye to, the sorrow of parting, and the excitement of the unknown.

He felt Loki’s magic flare through him, sparking in a familiar crackle that resonated with itself as it encountered the new bracelet.

“Where to?” Tony asked as they fell through space, a vortex of color before his eyes.

“Wherever we wish,” Loki’s voice whispered beguilingly beside him, his hand holding firmly as they spun into the cosmos.

In the tower champagne glasses were set in the sink, the sound of a vacuum began to run, and the

small gathering shuffled quietly about, cleaning up the evidence of the evening. The common room was returning to its former state, and, they knew, something unknown all together. The tower had always been home to Tony, and then Loki, and without them it would only be the same in appearance.

On two floors the lights were out and the still furnished rooms were empty, awaiting the return of the ones that called them home.

Chapter End Notes

THANK YOU for reading and taking this journey with me. I've really enjoyed working on this, writing, and sharing it with all of you.

I'll be creating a separate frostiron work of short stories, requests, prompts, and 1-2 chapter arcs as a collection of tales of their journey into the beyond (and perhaps a few trips home).

I'm not quite finished writing the pair, they're far too fun, so much so that they've been cutting into my other projects, the bastards. ;) As soon as I post the first chapter of that I'll link it here and mark this work complete so that a notification is possible.

Again, thank you so much for being a part of this and as always, please let me know what you think of this chapter.

If you have the time and would like to, I'd really appreciate some specific feedback to help me understand future projects. These questions are for the story as a whole.

-What part of this fic stood out the most to you and why?

-Were there any parts that stuck with you, or you found yourself coming back to (which and why)?

-While of course several of the characters were dynamic and developed outside of canon, how successful was characterization as a whole (if you can, please be specific to certain characters)?

-Did the writing style work for you? Why and why not? (what specifically?)

-What were the strengths and weaknesses?

-Anything else you'd like to add that wasn't covered?

-If you're taking the time to answer these, please, *please* include a prompt or request and I'll do my best to get it filled in the next story. Thanks!

for your convenience

This story will be continued in the form of a collection of short stories [here](#).

In format it is more of a spinoff than a direct continuation, though the relationship and history are the same.

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!